

A Namuyi Tibetan Woman's Journey



From Chinese Village
to Indian City
to Beijing

Li Xiaoqiong

AHP 30

na⁵³ mzi⁵³ zə¹¹ mi¹¹ ja⁴⁴ hĩ¹¹ rə⁴⁴ gu⁵³

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走出大凉山

一个纳木依藏族女孩的蜕变

A NAMUYI TIBETAN WOMAN'S JOURNEY
FROM CHINESE VILLAGE TO INDIAN CITY TO BEIJING

Li Xiaoqiong 李小琼 (སྨྱལ་མ། Drolma)

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SUMMARY: Li Xiaoqiong (Drolma), a na⁵³ mzi⁵³ Tibetan from Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province describes her childhood; parents; paternal grandmother's early life and death; village life including children's games, tending horses, and herding yaks; her experiences at primary school; a surrogate grandfather; her youngest brother; local lunar New Year festivities; her time at middle school including a special friend and love letters; her schooling at Qinghai Normal University in Xining City; her time in India including college experiences, travels, working in an NGO, and working at a call center in Delhi; and her return to China. Also included are two original poems, three stories by Li Xiaoqiong's grandmother, and photographs of Li Xiaoqiong's village and of her time in India.

FRONT COVER: A group of women sit in the courtyard of the groom's house and participate in an antiphonal song competition during a wedding. Photograph by Metok (October 2013).

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INTRODUCTION

My Tibetan name is Drolma, but my family calls me Agu Xiaoqingmi in our language. My Chinese name is Li Xiaoqiong. I am from Lianhe Township, Mianning County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. I am a straightforward person, which sometimes helps me but, at other times, hurts or angers others. I'm friendly and sympathetic.

I am Tibetan, but belong to a special group called Namuyi Tibetans. I feel lucky to have grown up in a remote village. We should preserve our traditions and language, even though we may not find them as useful or attractive as those of other cultures outside our own small communities. Our culture defines who we are.

Namuyi differ from many other Tibetans in terms of culture, tradition, clothes, and language. Namuyi beliefs in mountain deities more closely resemble those of the Yi¹ people than many Tibetans. We also speak a language that is very different from that of most other Tibetans. Our traditional clothes are similar to those of the Yi (see the pictures in the appendix). Namuyi historically lived in remote valleys, and seldom went out and contacted others, including other Tibetans. I had only seen other Tibetans on television, until I came to the English Training Program (ETP) in Xining City, Qinghai

¹ The Yi are one of China's fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups. They speak several related Tibeto-Burman languages, and live primarily in southwest China, with small populations in Vietnam and Thailand.

Province.

I was inspired to start writing this book by senior classmates and by ETP teachers at Qinghai Normal University because of my interest in writing, and because of my desire to share my culture, beliefs, and experiences with others. I had a powerful experience while studying in ETP. I found myself shunned to some extent. I felt like the world had turned upside down. However, I got through this period, and learned an important lesson that I want to share with you – never focus on what others think about you. Be confident and keep moving towards your goals. The truth is always true, no matter what others think.

It is good to write things down, because this enables them to last longer. This book consists of personal experiences and thoughts. Everything in here is true. Sometimes it is bitter to recall past difficulties but, in the end, it helps to better realize what life is and has been. Everybody has a life, and so everybody also has a story. Your own attitudes about what you want your life to be and how you want to tell your story depend on you. I am optimistic and have few regrets. Life may seem long, but we never know what will happen next - we should treat each moment as precious. Such thoughts have inspired me to live my life fully. I hope people can learn from the positive things I have written.

Sometimes we face challenges, difficulties, and joys. That's how life is, so don't panic when you are sad. Be optimistic and believe that everything will be fine, because a positive attitude and clear goals will create a foundation to start achieving them and things will improve. Life is not about going to college, having an office job, or marriage. Life is about living, and learning how to live as best you can.

I was lucky to travel to India, and my time there strengthened my hope that people can learn to love each other and live together peacefully. To be able to study in a foreign country was a wonderful experience for me. Indians treated me well. Though we were different in terms of appearance and culture, we treated each other like family and lived happily. It is my hope that all the countries in the world will live together in harmony and happiness.



January 2011. My family standing in our fields during New Year. (Left to right:) My father (Li Zhicai), mother (Ji Wenmei), younger brother (Li Xiaobao, front), older brother (Li Dingbo), and younger sister (Li Xiaohui) (photograph: Li Chunbo).

MY FAMILY

A cry came from a shabby house made of wood and stone. A woman lying on a small bed moaned in pain while a man paced up and down in front of the house wringing his hands. He was very worried after what seemed like ages, and then a very small someone screeched. An old woman came out of the house and told the man that his new child was a girl. He was delighted.

Mother was not allowed to leave the home for a month, as dictated by traditional Namuyi custom, to protect both of us from illness. Soon, a famous *pazi*² was asked to give me a name. He checked some books that he had brought from Lhasa and, after serious thought, named the girl Agu Drolma. Now that the girl had a name, everyone was ready to celebrate.

Father invited all our relatives and villagers to celebrate my birth. They brought eggs, chickens, and white sugar as gifts, and everyone celebrated my birth joyfully, as we celebrate the birth of every healthy child. The hosts killed a big sheep for a delicious meal, and rice liquor and beer were served to guests.

I was very lucky to grow up with Grandmother, who was full of stories that I loved to listen to. Her childhood had been difficult and Mother often warned me not to make her angry. Everyone in my family respected Grandmother and did whatever she said. She was a beautiful old woman, with lovely eyes. Villagers often said they wanted to swap their eyes for

² A *pazi* is a Namuyi religious practitioner who plays an important role in community affairs, especially during life-cycle rituals associated with birth and death.

hers. When I first heard that I was frightened and confused. How could they swap their eyes? Surely that would be very painful!

When I told my playmates that adults had said they wanted to swap their eyes with Grandmother they laughed and said, "How can anyone change their eyes?" They thought I was an idiot. I was hurt by their laughter. When told Grandmother, she only laughed merrily and said, "Don't be sad!"

My family consists of Mother (Ji Wenmei), Father (Li Zhicai), two younger brothers, a younger sister, and me. Father and Mother are cousins, the result of an arranged marriage. They were given Chinese names soon after their birth. Mother's Namuyi name is Baji Wujimi. Father's is Agu Suniyi.

Father is hard-working. He has worked at many jobs to make our family more comfortable. As the man of the house, Father takes care of our housing, clothes, and food.

Mother does all the house chores and everything a mother is supposed to do. I am glad to be one of her daughters. She encourages all of her children to be better people. She wants her children to be educated, as she herself is illiterate. When she was a child, her parents passed away, so she never got the chance to go to school. Instead, she had to work hard in the home and in the fields. Mother had an elder sister, two younger sisters, and a younger brother. Mother and her sisters helped their brother get an education, while none of them went near a school until they sent their children to one. Despite all the obstacles she faced in life, Mother is still very optimistic.

My two younger brothers are Li Dingbo and Li Xiaobao. Li Dingbo is older than Li Xiaobao. I attended primary school with Li Dingbo. Even when he was a little boy, he seemed very mature. In our village, most people like him because, whenever

they ask him for help, he helps them until he's exhausted.

Li Dingbo was a very good student from grade one up to grade three. Then, one day he swallowed some water while swimming in a river near our home. Soon after, his stomach became swollen, he couldn't urinate, and eventually he couldn't even walk. We sent him to hospitals in towns and cities, but none of them could cure him. We thought he would die, but he finally recovered, to our great joy.

After a year spent on various hospital beds, Brother returned to school, but he didn't like it as much as before. His performance on exams steadily got worse. We guessed his illness was to blame. As his scores dropped, nobody really minded. We were just happy he was healthy.

Li Xiaobao is mischievous. He was the cutest kid among all of us, even though he was skinny. I cared for him while he was a baby. He liked chasing me when he was able to walk and run. I miss the days when I was with him. He had small bright eyes that shone whenever he laughed. He was also the luckiest child because by the time he was born, our family situation was better than when I was a child, and he never wanted for anything, including school fees.

My younger sister is talkative, smart, tall, and plump. She enjoys studying. She somehow got into the habit of collecting cute pictures and pasting them on the walls in our room and then spent a long time looking at those pictures. She also helped me scratch my back whenever it was itchy. I miss those days with her in our room back home.

We lived together joyfully, though life made us cry and laugh at different times. This is how life is. I love my family dearly.



September 2011. My family at our home (Li Chunbo).



2013. My neighbor, Qin Xiaoying, points at nearby mountains in Nianhe Village (Metok).

GRANDMOTHER

GRANDMOTHER'S LIFE

Grandmother shared the following details of her life story with me.

I married in 1942 when I was fourteen, because that's what my parents decided. Father was a rich, well-known, and respected landlord. He owned all the land in our home area. Father had two wives. Before he married my mother he had a wife, but she could not give birth, so he married my mother and had my younger brother and me. I had a secure childhood with two mothers and the richest local father. Everybody admired us. When I was fourteen, another rich family came to propose. That family was Mother's aunt's relative.

Father accepted their proposal and I married Mother's aunt's grandson in 1942. We had a peaceful life supported by both families. My husband treated me well and we had our first baby, a son, after three years of marriage. He brought much happiness to our family. At that time, a son was treated like gold because people believed a son brought wealth and luck. My son's arrival was a great start to my marriage. I was happy and fulfilled during that time.

Father and Mother were getting older day by day. Father's first wife was an opium addict and died a few years after my marriage. Only rich people could afford opium and my family members smoked it every day. They didn't realize it was a drug that slowly kills.

The years passed and many sad incidents happened. Mr. Mao came to control all of China and life became

chaotic. Mr. Mao started collecting all the rich people's and landlords' property. Mr. Mao told people that a new world was coming and rich people and landlords must divide their property with the poor, and that everybody would have the same things and eat the same things. Many disagreed with Mr. Mao and rebelled. Then Mr. Mao ordered soldiers to kill the rebels. Our home place then became a battlefield. People started shooting and killing each other.

My parents, my husband, and many of my other relatives died during that time. Father was very unhappy with the new rules from Mr. Mao and all the changes that came with the founding of the new China. He and other relatives and landowners rebelled. They were then killed, leaving me with no parents and no husband. After I lost everything – parents, land, husband, and relatives – it was like I had fallen into a deep hole from which I could not escape. Everybody became equally poor with very little money. We had to work each day just to have a little to eat. Everyone worked in the same place and ate together. Time passed, and I married a man who worked in my commune. Later, the government divided land and gave us some land with a house. I then moved into that house with my second husband and son.

Life became more secure. I eventually had three more sons and two daughters. My eldest son married a woman nine years his junior. My other two sons married my aunt's grandsons' daughters and my two daughters married my aunt's grandson's sons. Life continued.



2012. A Yi neighbor in the village (Li Xiaoqiong).



2011. My aunt (Shu Luomo).

MY CHILDHOOD WITH GRANDMOTHER

Grandmother was a great teacher who taught me how to clean chopsticks, cook various foods, and, most importantly, how to be independent, to help my peers, and to respect elders. Grandmother was a very good, kind-hearted woman. She scolded me when I fought my siblings and frequently encouraged me to do the right thing.

I was the oldest child and many responsibilities fell on my shoulders. Grandmother always asked me to do chores with her, for example, we washed dishes together after meals. She stood next to me and explained each little detail about doing the dishes. I wondered why she chose me to wash the dishes, because I hated doing it. Later when I left for boarding school, I realized how many things Grandmother had taught me. Unlike some other students, I could easily do daily chores by myself. I felt proud when I saw other kids in school who couldn't wash their own dishes. Sometimes, I mocked them, saying, "Shame on you, shame on you. You can't even wash your own dishes."

When I fought with neighborhood children and returned home crying, Grandmother never gave me any sympathy. Instead, she made fun of me and said I was just a little loser. Eventually, she cheered me up by telling a funny story or singing something encouraging like, "Once upon a time, there was this little girl named Drolma. She was very brave and never cried when she fought. She laughed when she danced in the rain and lived a full, happy life." Such things always made me happy and then I would jump around her like a small puppy playing around its mother.

Mother is lazy when it comes to family chores and taking care of children. However, when I was a child, she was often

busy working outside. She also often visited relatives and joined village meetings, because Father worked away from home. Mother needed to take care of everything for us. Often, she was so busy organizing her life that she had no time to carefully attend to our daily needs. So, this is why Grandmother and I took care of family issues. Grandma was nearly seventy at that time, but she was strong and active. She was constantly going here and there, feeding the pigs, and feeding the children. She wasn't bothered by constant duties and work. I was her faithful helper. My biggest task was to go into the fields to fetch weeds to feed the pigs. We worked together well. However, sometimes if I returned just as it was getting dark, Grandmother would scold, "Drolma, you are the oldest child so you should be responsible. Don't do this again, or I'll punish you."

At such times, I wished I was not the eldest, but I never said so because I knew she was my grandmother and I should obey her. I also felt guilty because no matter how hard she worked, she never complained. She amazed me, because some of the other village grandmothers never worked in their homes, though they were younger than grandmother.

I heard from some of my old relatives that Grandmother took care of me after I was born. I believe it because Mother never spent much time with any of my siblings, because she was busy with other concerns. Grandmother cared for my sister and brothers, and gave names to all of us except my younger brother.

Mother did not give birth in a hospital. We were all born in our home, with only Grandmother attending. Her love and care helped us be a loving family. She was also a good cook. Whenever she cooked, I stayed nearby so that I could smell the food.

A BIRD

I was in grade six in Primary School and had just finished classes one afternoon and was ready to go home. Mother came to pick me up. She seemed anxious. When I asked her what was wrong she ignored me. When we got home, Mother stopped me at the gate and told me that Grandmother was seriously ill.

I trailed after Mother and I followed the instructions she whispered to me. Many people were sitting beside Grandmother's bed. My heart filled with fear. Grandmother had taken good care of me, and had filled my days with wonderful stories.

The night before Grandmother got sick, Mother had arranged for me to sleep with her, as I always did, but I had refused. I don't exactly know why, but I was somehow afraid to sleep with her. After my stubborn insistence, Mother told me to get a blanket and sleep in the living room.

A few minutes later, I still felt afraid, and went to Mother and told her that I was afraid. At that time Mother was sleeping with Younger Brother, who was just four months old. Mother told me that I couldn't sleep with her because she was afraid I would kick him during the night. That night I slept on the floor by Mother's bed.

The next day Grandmother was seriously ill and people thought she would soon die. However, Grandmother surprised us all – she began to eat again after a few days. Everyone thought that Grandmother had recovered. However, one evening when Father returned from a neighbor's home, he went to Grandmother's room and called, "Mother, do you need some water?"

There was no answer.

Father went over to her bed, looked at her pale white face, and knew that she had died. He cried, "Mother! Mother! Can you hear me?"

When I heard Father's cry, I ran to Grandmother's room. Father was cradling her in his arms and crying. I also wept. Mother was woken by our voices. She came, and then rushed to Grandmother's second son's home. They joined us a few minutes later.

Everyone in the room was crying. I wailed the loudest. Father and Grandmother's second son washed her body. Father then went outside with a rifle. He fired it into the air and shouted at the sky. Then he came inside, put the gun on the table, and came back to the room where Grandmother was laid out. According to our custom, we fire a gun and shout to the sky whenever someone passes away, to notify people in the surrounding area that there has been a death.

The next day, people began flooding into our home to pay their respects to Grandmother. We usually lay the corpse out for six days and then cremate it, but we put Grandmother's corpse in the living room for just three days, because all her children and grandchildren had arrived by then, and all the necessary rituals were also completed in that time. Then we burned her corpse and made a grave for her ashes. We also burned everything that belonged to her, because we thought she would need it all in the afterlife.

After Grandmother passed away, we believed that her soul would return to our home and we would then know what she would become in the next life. On the third day after she died, we opened all the doors and windows and scattered white flour across the living room floor.

Everybody slept soundly. Early the next morning my

parents woke and saw footprints on the floor. They looked at them carefully, and decided that they were bird footprints. We then concluded that Grandmother had become a bird. One of our *pazi* said, "She had a sorrowful life when she was young, but after she turned forty her life became wonderful. Our Buddha must have blessed her!" We all prayed for her and hoped she would live her next life in peace and happiness.

Although the grave we made for Grandmother was for her to stay in, it was also to demonstrate that we had not forgotten her. For the next three years, during New Year celebrations, we put sausages, apples, and other good foods in front of Grandmother's grave. We also brought fireworks and set them off at her grave.

At that time, I did not understand what those things meant and asked Mother, "Will Grandmother eat the food we have left?"

Mother said, "Your Grandmother has gone to Heaven and will eat all the food there. She can see everything happening on earth." I then looked up at the sky, hoping Grandmother would see me.

Grandmother devoted her life to her children and grandchildren. I truly appreciate what she has done for my family.



2012. Food for a ritual at Grandmother's grave (Xiaoqiong).



2012. Firecrackers ready to be lit at Grandmother's grave (Li Xiaoqiong).



2012. The third day of the Chinese New Year. My cousin and the wife of another cousin pray in front of Grandmother's grave (Li Xiaoqiong).



2012. My brother, Li Dingbo, and my cousin place firecrackers near Grandmother's grave (Li Xiaoqiong).



2012. My relatives and sister look at a star and wish Grandmother peace (Li Xiaoqiong).



2012. Relatives at Grandmother's grave (Li Xiaoqiong).

GRANDMOTHER'S STORIES

THE FALSE *PAZI*'S REVENGE

Long ago, a family lived alone in a forest. In order to leave the forest they needed to walk for a month to reach its edge. The family had eight members – the parents and their six daughters. They all lived happily together. One day, however, the father began worrying about the future and said to his wife, "We don't have a son. Why don't we have a son?"

The wife looked at her husband in surprise. She thought about it for a bit and then said, "I'm too old to have another child."

Her husband explained that in a certain village there was an old man who was the most famous *pazi* in the Namuyi area. "When many families like ours had no son, they invited him to chant scriptures and conduct rituals. Soon thereafter, they produced an heir," he said. The couple then decided to invite that *pazi* to come to their home to do rituals.

One cool morning in southwest Sichuan, the sun was hiding in the cloudy sky while people still snored in their beds. The father was awakened by the cock's crow, got out of bed, and began making preparations to go invite that *pazi*, who lived far from the family.

He wrapped up much bread and meat. Once he was ready for his journey, he kissed his wife's thin face goodbye and left. Even though the journey was long and tiring, the father was happy when he thought of his future son. After a month, he reached the *pazi*'s home. The *pazi*'s family took one look at the

exhausted man and immediately prepared a meal for him. After the meal, they urged him to rest.

It was lunchtime when he woke up. The *pazi's* family prepared food for him again. After eating, the husband explained why he had come. The *pazi* looked at him and said nothing for a while. Eventually, the *pazi* said, "It will be very difficult for you to have a son, but I'll do my best to help you."

The visitor was delighted to hear this, and they immediately began making preparations to leave. The next morning, they set out from the *pazi's* home. On the way, they saw many trees and smiling flowers. Everything was beautiful. Dew glistened on flower petals and the husband's heart brimmed with joy. As they went along, he imagined a wonderful future for himself and his family. A month passed like minutes.

On the night they reached his home, the family prepared a sheep, two chickens, and some pork for the *pazi*. All the daughters were nicely dressed. Everybody got ready to begin the ritual that night.

The *pazi* began the ritual with the husband assisting. The girls sat quietly and politely while the ritual was carried out. Everybody in the family respected the *pazi* and treated him well. However, he was actually a terrible liar who had cheated countless people. Unfortunately, the poor family didn't know this. The ritual continued and their hearts filled with hope.

Suddenly, the austere atmosphere was broken by a titanic, "*Brrr rr r!*" Everyone turned to the *pazi*. The youngest daughter laughed, pointed at him, and said loudly, "You farted!"

The *pazi's* face became red but, controlling his shame and anger, he finished the ritual. The *pazi* then told the father that something bad in the family was preventing them from

having a son. He said, "In a dream last night, an old man told me that your youngest daughter was bringing misfortune to your family. If you do not give your youngest daughter to tigers in the deep forest, you'll never have a son."

The father was terrified to hear this, and his heart ached. He told his wife what the *pazi* had said, which made her faint immediately. In the end, however, they decided to send the girl deep into the forest.

The morning they sent off the daughter, they gave her a big bundle of meat and said, "We love you, but our family needs a son."

The girl understood that this was the *pazi's* revenge, kissed her mother, walked out of the house, and strode into the deep forest. She walked alone in the forest, her mind full of fear. She looked up at the sky with a fixed smile on her face, thinking that she must be the stupidest person in the world. Knowing the inevitable outcome, she had blindly accepted her parents' decision to send her away. She walked for almost two days without eating anything. It seemed that the entire world was laughing at her. Her mind was sometimes empty, sometimes full. She was certain she would die.

One morning she felt a pain in her belly – a real pain, stabbing her body. That was the first time she had ever known real hunger. She thought, "Will I die now? What will happen next?" Eventually, she collapsed in exhaustion, rolled down a hill, and fell into a deep hole. Though she thought this was a terrible disaster, it was actually a stroke of luck. The hole that she fell into belonged to a rich family, but all the family members except for one son had died of cancer. That boy was very lonely, and spent every day waiting for someone to come keep him company. From time to time, he left his home to

check the holes he had dug in the forest, hoping to catch tigers and other wild animals.

As the boy checked his traps that day, his foot bumped something strange. He screamed, looked down, and saw a girl. He called to her, but received no answer. He then picked her up, carried her to his home, and fed her rice and water. Strength slowly returned to her body. After some time, the girl finally opened her eyes and asked the boy "Is this Heaven?"

The boy explained how he had met her, and where she was. Overcome with gratitude, the girl poured her heart out to the boy, telling him everything about why she was in the forest. In return, the boy told her the sad story of his life and why he was alone.

They soon lived and worked together. Time passed – days, months, and years. Eventually the girl gave birth to a daughter. One day, as the mother lay on the bed with her daughter, the little girl turned to her and said, "Where are my grandparents?"

This innocent question made the mother recall her past life. She was suddenly filled with longing to see her parents, and tears filled her eyes. Wiping away a tear, she said, "They live far away, but I'll take you to see them." Soon mother, father, and daughter set off.

When they reached the girl's home, an old man was sitting in front of the door lazily chopping wood. Beside him, an old woman was washing clothes in a pot. When the old woman saw the young mother, she cried and rushed to her. The daughter also cried and exclaimed, "Mother! I missed you so much!"

The family still had no son. The girl asked her mother, "What happened after I left?"

The old woman told her daughter everything: After she left, the family waited for a son. Time passed. Eventually she realized that she was too old to have a son, and went to find the *pazi* who had cheated them. However, by the time they arrived, the *pazi* had died a few years earlier during an earthquake that had destroyed his village and everyone in it.

The old mother said, "Your father and I wallowed in regret for many years. After we figured out that the *pazi* had lied to us, we searched for you, but we didn't find any trace after two years of looking, so we gave up."

"I missed all of you," the girl said, tears filling her eyes. They hugged each other and smiled. The daughter's husband's eyes glistened with tears. The granddaughter just stared at everyone in complete bafflement.

CUONUMI

A few families lived in a small village deep in the forest. One family had two sons and one daughter. The mother had raised the children alone after a *cuonumi* – a ghost that eats humans – had taken her husband away. *Cuonumi* are smarter than people. In this particular village, *cuonumi* usually took a person away and then the person would be gone for a long while. When the villagers had almost given up hope, the missing person would often reappear in the village, but just as often, they never came back. Day by day, year after year, the village population decreased as residents steadily lost their loved ones. The whole village was becoming hushed and full of fear. People stopped farming and rarely left their homes. The village became a very sad place.

Even though the villagers didn't often leave their homes, *cuonumi* found ways to catch them and take them away. One winter afternoon, the mother of the family thought about going out to look for something to eat, since they had lacked food for a few days. They had eaten everything there was to eat in the house. The mother decided to go to her aunt's home, which was far away, to ask for food. It would take three days for her to go and return. Before she left she told her two sons and daughter, "*Cuonumi* are very dangerous. Be careful and do not go outside the house. Even if someone comes and knocks on the door, don't open it. When I come back in three days, I will sing the rabbit song and only then should you open the door." The mother then took a long deep breath and started off.

It was a freezing morning when she left. On the way, she heard the sounds of nature – the sounds of trees rubbing each other. She felt scared, but continued. She knew that a *cuonumi* might appear at any moment. On the second day of her journey, she was totally exhausted and felt very hungry. Suddenly a *cuonumi* appeared. She was so scared that she could not run or struggle. She knew *cuonumi* were very fast. The *cuonumi* killed her and took her corpse and belongings to the mountains.

Many days passed and the *cuonumi* thought of going to the woman's home and eating her children. She put on the dead mother's clothes and started her journey. When she reached the dead woman's house, she knocked on the door loudly and rudely bellowed, "Sons and daughter! Mother is home."

No one opened the door. The two sons and daughter inside the home were afraid and worried. The daughter said, "We should not open the door til she proves she's our mother." Then the daughter asked the *cuonumi* to show them her hand. The *cuonumi* put her hand in a small hole over the door and the

daughter touched it. She felt it was very hairy and said, "This is not our mother. Our mother has not even a single hair on her hand."

The *cuonumi* angrily returned home, removed all the hair on her hands, returned to the house, and knocked on the door again. When nobody opened it, she put her hand through the window and told the children to touch it. She said, "I'm your mother and I've brought lots of food."

The two starving sons were eager to open the door and get to the food. However, the daughter insisted on not opening the door because she still wasn't sure that it was her mother and she had not sung the rabbit song. The daughter and two sons had an argument, which the *cuonumi* overheard. She then started to sing the rabbit song and pushed a little food through the window. The sons were delighted to see the food and insisted on opening the door. When the door opened, the *cuonumi* ran inside, grabbed the boys, and began eating them.

Meanwhile, the daughter grabbed some oil and rope, and fled. When she reached a huge tree she stopped and climbed to the top. She sat quietly for a while, her heart pounding, and then she heard the *cuonumi* approaching. When the *cuonumi* got to the tree, it began climbing up, bit by bit. The daughter was terrified. She thought she would also be eaten, just like her other family members. Suddenly, recalling that she had the oil, she poured some down the tree. The tree became very slippery, and the *cuonumi* lost her grip and fell to the earth. The *cuonumi* tried many times to climb up but was unsuccessful. Finally she gave up and vanished into the forest.

The girl stayed in the tree for three and a half days. She was exhausted and starving. She was near death. She wanted to climb down, but she was afraid the *cuonumi* would return at

any moment. Finally, on the fourth day, an old man with a big axe passed by. The girl called, "Save me! Help me!"

The old man looked up, saw the girl, and asked what had happened. The girl then climbed down and told everything to the old man, who said, "Don't worry, I'll help and protect you." He was a very strong old man who hunted and killed *cuonumi*. He then took her to his village, where she lived happily with his family.

A MOTHER AND BABY GHOSTS

Long ago in our village a woman and her child died in childbirth. Everyone in the village was very sad and wept bitterly. They buried the mother with the baby inside her body. Tragedy ensued because neither mother nor baby was actually dead. The woman awoke when deep inside the ground. She tried hard to make a sound, wanting to get out, but no one heard her. So she and her baby died and their souls, in the form of ghosts, lingered around the village.

Days went by. Village children vanished one by one. Nobody knew where the children had gone. Some said they had gone together to another town, others said the ghosts had taken them. There was no agreed-upon explanation. Some people were waiting for their children to come back home. Some were crying as they searched and waited for their beloved children, but no one ever saw their children again. It seemed they had just disappeared into thin air and nobody had a clue. People grew more anxious. The whole village looked disordered and had a very sad atmosphere. Then one day they decided to invite a famous *pazi* from a neighboring village to divine where the

children were.

The *pazi* summoned all the young, strong men of the village to gather at the village center and told them to bring sheep, pigs, and roosters. When the men and sacrificial animals were gathered, the *pazi* cut the throat of a bright red rooster and tossed it to the ground. Then he took some holy water he had fetched from deep in the forest where nobody lived, and sprinkled it on the pig and sheep. Next, he told the young men to make a big fire and stand around it in a circle. He took out a religious implement that looked like a water dipper. He blew into it, making a loud sound. Finally, he told the men to repeat what he chanted.

Some hours later, the *pazi* stopped and told the men to sit and listen to his explanation as to why the children were missing. "A very powerful mother ghost is in your village. She is full of hatred. She was buried alive and died underground. She is taking revenge on the village by taking your children."

The villagers were shocked and wondered if this could be true. However, they followed the *pazi's* instructions and dug into the woman's grave. They were shocked to find an empty coffin and became even more worried. Suddenly, a man stood and asked the *pazi* how to prevent the ghost from taking more children and make the ghost leave the village permanently.

The next day, the *pazi* made two human figures out of grass. One figure symbolized the mother ghost and the other symbolized the baby ghost. Everyone then returned to the grave. The *pazi* ordered the women to close their eyes and block their ears. He told the men to remove the coffin from the grave, bring it near the fire, and put the two grass figures inside the coffin. Then he began chanting, "Oh pitiful mother and baby, you both died for no reason. We did not intend to kill you. Now you are

taking revenge by taking the village children. This is unacceptable. It's time to stop. I will now burn you two and send you to Hell. You both will be banished."

When he finished chanting he burned the coffin and put all the ashes in a pot. Then the *pazi* and the village men took the pot to an intersection of three roads and buried it.

After the ritual, the *pazi* told the villagers that the ghosts had been banished and would never return. He also said that no more children would vanish. Everything returned to normal and from that time on, corpses were cremated.



2012. Two of my older relatives in my village (Li Xiaoqiong).

VILLAGE LIFE

CHILDREN'S GAMES

Village adults were often occupied with household chores and farm work. Older village children usually took care of the younger children. We played such games as hide and seek, chase, and 'picking stones', which was our favourite.

Leaves filled the air one autumn day. Golden fields surrounding the village added to the landscape's beauty. It was time to harvest the rice. Birds twittered above my head and happy-faced children chased each other. Meanwhile, adults were busy harvesting rice. Father, Mother, and Grandmother had all gone to help a relative with their harvest.

As usual, I went to collect weeds for our pigs because locals don't plant fodder for pigs. My village is lush and green, and weeds grow everywhere, especially in barley and rice fields. Pigs are raised to slaughter and eat during the lunar New Year period. We call this holiday 'Kushi'. We also raise chickens that we kill and eat when visitors come.

Finding food for the pigs was my duty. No matter how bad the weather was, I went to cut plants in the barley and rice fields. My friends and I worked together. When we had collected a full basket of weeds, we sat and played picking stones. There are various ways to play this game, but ten stones are always required. Players divide into two groups and each group has the same numbers of stones. First, one group plays and the other watches. Just after one group finishes playing, the other starts. The group that plays puts all ten stones on the ground, then picks them up as quickly as they can, racing with

the other person. The winner is whoever picks up their ten stones first.

The game takes about an hour. Usually the winner takes all the weeds the losers collected. The losers then must gather more weeds, because if they return home empty-handed, their mothers scold them harshly.

That day, I played with my mates and won, so I proudly went home with my basket doubly full of weeds. On the other hand, my friends went on collecting weeds, and didn't complain, since that was a rule of the game.



2011. Li Xiaobao (my brother) climbs one of our family's cherry trees (Li Chunbo).

HORSES

Before I went to school, Father earned money as a horse trader. He travelled to different places, purchased horses, and then brought them back home. People in surrounding villages came to our home to buy horses. I'm not sure exactly how much he sold the horses for, but I guess it was around 2,000 to 3,000 RMB each. Usually, he sold all the horses but, on some exceptional occasions, he kept a few horses at home, and we got the chance to feed and ride them. It's a lot of work to care for horses. Our courtyard was rather small and a few horses made it very crowded.

My village was surrounded by forested mountains along the Yalong River. It was breathtakingly beautiful during the summer when everything was green. Younger Brother (Li Dingbo), and I usually cared for the horses. Father didn't want us to keep the horses at home because they were too noisy. Everyday, Younger Brother and I fed and exercised the horses, and rode them to the nearby mountain grassland.

Since I spent so much time with the horses, I began to enjoy riding, and I even came to love one horse as a special friend. Lao Ma (Old Horse), the mother of a young foal, was beautiful with big eyes and a long mane. Her body was chestnut brown. Lao Ma's foal was lovely, too. Whenever I saw him, I imagined he would be a very fine horse when he grew up.

I loved Lao Ma and cared for her more than other horses. She knew that I liked her, and was always nice to me and followed my orders. In contrast, she never obeyed Younger Brother. Whenever I rode her, she ran gently, and I never needed to use a saddle on her. Younger Brother and I used to have horse races. He had a black horse to race, but I always won,

even without a saddle.

The other village children were jealous when they saw me riding Lao Ma without a saddle. Most of them had never had a chance to ride a horse, let alone one as nice as mine. Their admiration made me even fonder of Lao Ma. I would touch her hair softly, and she would walk gently. Though she didn't talk, I felt that she understood me.

Sometimes when I would come home for supper or lunch I would leave her and her foal with other horses in the grassland, but I never lost her. When I finished my meal, I put barley in a pot, and then I went to the grassland and searched for Lao Ma. I never spent much energy looking for her. I just shook the pot and made sounds like a horse. Within five minutes she would be in front of me, munching the barley inside the pot. My life was really happy when I was with Lao Ma.

Days passed and became years. Lao Ma and I never separated. However, nothing is constant. Time moves on and there isn't anything we can do about that. Lao Ma grew older and weaker. I started to worry about her, but my love for her never changed.

One cold, rainy day, the village was wrapped in silence. Villagers were in their houses huddled around a warm fire. That day, my beloved Lao Ma died of old age. Horses' lives are shorter than ours. I cried endlessly when I learned this. Seeing her stiff lifeless body, I felt totally lost. I wept knowing Lao Ma would never return. Lao Ma's death made me better understand the universal nature of impermanence.

Lao Ma was the first and last horse I took care of. I grew up and went to school. Father soon stopped trading horses because it had stopped being profitable. Economic conditions had become better and locals were using bicycles, motorcycles, and cars rather than horses.



July 2010. Yalong River Bridge. My home is situated under the cloud-topped mountains (Han Xiaoyan).

HERDING YAKS

When I was eight, our family lived in a densely forested area with vast grassland and mountains. We fetched buckets of water from a nearby river.

One beautiful spring day, Mother woke me around five a.m. I unwillingly, woke up. Mother told me to wake Father and have breakfast of a cup of butter tea and some roasted potatoes. Over breakfast, Mother and Father talked about the yaks. Mother asked how we could care for the yaks that Father had just bought, because there was no one in the family who had the time. Father finally told Mother that he would care for the yaks no matter what it cost him.

I was excited about the yaks and wanted to go with him to herd them, but he refused. After breakfast, Father took a robe made of yak hair, a few bags of salt, and a big bottle of water, and walked towards the mountain where our yaks were. He didn't notice me following him.

The morning was fresh, the trail was clean, and everything was quiet. All I could hear were Father's steps. I followed him a long way until he finally noticed me. He looked at me and asked in surprise, "Drolma, why didn't you listen to me? You can't herd the yaks with me. Go home. Your mother must be searching for you."

I ignored him and continued following. Father finally agreed to let me herd the yaks with him. Then, hand in hand, we walked on. It took us the whole morning to reach our destination. I was happy because, apart from Father, I was the first person in our family to see the newly bought yaks. They were strong and handsome. Father cautioned, "Don't approach them. They are not pets. They can be dangerous when they are

angry, so just stay away from them."

Though Father had warned me, I felt yaks were very beautiful and kind animals. I followed Father as he herded them to places with plenty of grass and water. There were around twenty yaks. Some were black and some were both black and white, their colors complementing the grassland scenery.

Suddenly, a few raindrops signaled the start of a downpour. As the rain splashed down, Father and I ran into a small cave. The yaks continued grazing, looking big and strong in the rain. The rain didn't bother them. The yaks had lived in the mountains for years, and did whatever they wanted to do. I suddenly felt great respect for yaks. While sitting in the cave watching the yaks, Father told me many things about them. He also talked about an old uncle in our village of the Yi nationality, who had helped us care for the yaks. We paid him 200 RMB each year for his work.

The yaks roamed freely on the mountain. Whenever a yak was born or we bought a new one, we made a small hole in its ear or tied a piece of cloth around their legs to indicate that they belonged to our family. Father said mother yaks give birth to one calf each year and thus we would have more and more in the future. I then believed that one day we would have many yaks. We usually didn't milk female yaks, but we cut their hair each year, which was Father's duty.

After the rain, it was time to eat. Father and I stayed inside that cozy cave for lunch. That was my first encounter with yaks.

SCHOOL

PRIMARY SCHOOL

When I was six, I began attending primary school. Grandmother's lesson to be persistent served me well in school. I thought that speaking loudly and acting like a boy would make me seem confident, so that's what I did in class. I was very naughty and gave my teachers and parents many headaches.

The first day I went to school was a nice day. The sky was blue, and the sunshine was bright. "Such a perfect day," I murmured to myself. Mother held my school bag, which she had bought in the county town, which was four hours by bus from our village. Still, despite the distance, people liked to go there because of the shops. Teddy bears, toy guns, and fake cell phones that could be purchased there amazed me when I first saw them. I said to myself, "Someday I'll also go to town and buy things."

Mother seemed to overhear my thoughts and looked at me in surprise, but kept quiet. A few minutes later, a neighbor walked over and said to Mother, "Such a nice day" and asked where we were going. She told him she was sending me to school. He replied that he wanted to send his son to school, too. They talked for a while, and then the four of us, two children and two adults, set off.

As we walked, I played with my neighbor's son. We had a lot of fun on the way. A few minutes later we reached the school that I would attend for the next six years. Some of the many people at the school that day were strangers, and some

were my fellow villagers. Seeing many people stimulated me. There were so many new children that I got tired just looking at them.

After some time passed, Mother and I went to the reception area to register, imitating what others did. After registration Mother told me to do whatever I liked. I soon gathered some playmates around me and spent the rest of the day playing with them.

Two days later, I began attending classes. Sitting in the classroom, my heart was full of anxiety and excitement. I was excited to learn Chinese characters. As a Tibetan who lived in an ethnically mixed area in China, I needed to learn Chinese to brighten my future. I was anxious about the teacher, thinking, "Will they speak my language?"

My Chinese teacher was a short fat woman, who used to live in our village. Her home was in a county town far from our village. She was a good woman who cared about us and taught us responsibly. Her helpfulness encouraged me to attend class.

I often played with other students. One day, as the sunshine caressed our heads, a playmate asked me to go steal apples with him. Tserang was my best friend. We often did things together so we went off to steal apples.

We called more boys to join us on the way. All of us were very excited and forgot that the weather was extremely hot. There were five of us and I was the only girl.

When we reached the orchard we saw what seemed like thousands of apples dangling from the trees. The apples seemed shy too, hiding their red cheeks behind the leaves. We knocked some off their branches by throwing stones at them.

When we were about to collect the apples, two dogs suddenly appeared and began chasing us. Terrified, we ran as

fast as we could, having utterly forgotten the apples. We were focused on escaping from the dogs.

As soon as we got outside the orchard, it began raining heavily. I heard a loud, "Woof! Woof!" behind me. The dogs were still chasing us and getting closer. I lost track of my playmates and ran crazily in the rain without any sense of direction. Eventually the dogs caught up with me. I don't remember what happened. All I remember was the pain, and then nothing.

When I awoke, Mother was sitting by my side. I asked her why I was there. She said nothing, and just looked at me like a stranger. "Go to sleep and be quiet," she said. Her reply surprised me and made me sad. She was usually an outgoing, carefree woman, but that day she looked worried. I returned to sleep without asking more questions.

I stayed at home in bed for a long time, and didn't attend school for the remainder of the semester.

REPEATING FIRST YEAR

When I returned to school, I couldn't catch up with my classmates, so I dropped out and waited for a new year to begin. When I began grade one the second time, I was seven years old. This made me sad, because most other children began school when they were six. I felt old. My classmates constantly mistook me for a grade two student, which embarrassed me. All I thought about was finishing primary school as soon as possible.

Time passed very slowly as I repeated my first year of school. I was bored and often became quiet, and hesitated when I needed to do something. I did not listen carefully in class and

often slept at my desk.

Once, I was sleeping in the classroom with my mouth open wide. I was dreaming about food, and saliva poured from my mouth. The students and even the teacher noticed, and gathered around, pointing and laughing at me. When I awoke I was very embarrassed. Afterwards, I became even more withdrawn, and was too shy to talk in front of those people. Time crept by even more slowly.



2012. Two of my cousins wear Yi clothing (Li Xiaoqiong).

FAKE GRANDFATHER

A NEW GRANDFATHER

After Grandmother passed away, I smiled at the sky whenever I felt unhappy, hoping that Grandmother would see me. This encouraged me. My paternal grandfather and my mother's parents died before I came to this world. Now the only grandparent I knew had left me and gone to Heaven. I felt somewhat abandoned.

After Grandmother died, nobody in my family had time to tell me stories. I often spent time with an old man who I called Fake Grandfather. Most villagers are related, because of our marriage customs. For example, when Mother married Father, Father's sister married Mother's brother. Fake Grandfather was also my relative, but I liked to insult him by calling him Fake Grandfather. I didn't want my friends to think he was my real relative – he was a local eccentric and I worried people would laugh at me if they thought he was my 'real' relative.

Fake Grandfather was kind to me and gave me candy. After Grandmother passed away, Fake Grandfather cared for me when my parents were working in the fields. I slowly became more willing to stay with him and play near him.

After lunch one day I was sitting with Fake Grandfather. The sunshine was warm enough for us to sit comfortably outside. He told me to bring his black yak hair blanket. Villagers used yak hair to make blankets and coats. We don't milk yaks, because we think that they then would not have enough milk to feed their babies. We don't usually butcher yaks

either, only killing some to give to guests at funerals when an elder dies.

I fetched Fake Grandfather's blanket and returned. He patted me on the head and ran his fingers through my hair that was short like a boy's. Fake Grandfather said, "Drolma, why don't you have long hair like other girls?"

I said, "If my hair is long, I will lose when I fight boys, because they will pull my hair." Girls in my village always lost fights with boys, because they cried whenever the boys pulled their hair. I talked to Mother, and she agreed and cut my hair short. In my village, mothers usually cut our hair.

Fake Grandfather laughed, and put a white candy in my mouth.

BOWL HAIRCUT BOY

One afternoon, I was sitting with Fake Grandfather in front of his house, which looked as if it was about to fall down. Although he had a chance to live with his son, he refused. He said, "Life in a fancy house would make me uncomfortable."

During the time I was with Fake Grandfather, nobody in the village knew how to give fashionable hairstyles. A few village boys and their parents came and sat with us. The parents had brought their boy to get haircuts from Fake Grandfather. One parent said, "Grandfather, can you cut my kid's hair? It keeps getting longer and longer."

Fake Grandfather said, "OK, but make sure he sits still." Then he went into his house to get his scissors. Fake Grandfather returned with the scissors and a pot of warm water. He then began cutting the boys' hair, one boy after another.

Tserang, my best friend, was also the naughtiest boy in the village. When it was his turn, he sat and played with his toy gun. The gun was made of wood but he used it just as if it were a real gun. Tserang squirmed and twisted as he pointed and fired his wooden gun. His constant squirming made it difficult for Fake Grandfather to cut his hair. Fake Grandfather finally went back into his house and brought out a bowl. He said loudly to Tserang, "Naughty boy, now I'll cut your hair with this bowl." He put the bowl on Tserang's head and began to cut quickly around the rim. When he was done, and took away the bowl, we all burst out laughing, because of Tserang's head now looked really weird. Tserang was embarrassed and ran home.

The next day, when I went to school, I saw Tserang beating a classmate. I ran over to see what had happened. The boy had called Tserang 'Bowl Hair Boy,' which infuriated Tserang. Nevertheless, we all called Tserang 'Bowl Hair Boy' from then on.

SKIPPING CLASS

I was very happy at the age of thirteen. Villagers called me Little Boy. I never thought that that was a bad name. In fact, I liked it. People praise docile girls and my parents are the same. Sometimes, therefore, they were disappointed with my wild behavior. Whenever villagers talked about their children they mentioned me. In contrast, their children seemed to be sweet little angels.

My parents tried hard to teach me to behave well. Whenever I was with Mother, she explained how to be a good person and why that was important. It didn't help, however,

and I always ended up in trouble. For example, one day as I was preparing for school, I realized that my books were not in my bag. Without my books, my teacher would make me stand outside the classroom, which was very embarrassing. I had stood outside the classroom many times, and I hated it.

I was very worried about my books. I looked for them everywhere, but found nothing. I was disappointed with myself. Class would start in ten minutes and I needed twenty minutes to walk to school. With an empty bag, I set off running to school. When I arrived at school the bell was ringing. I was late for class and since I didn't have my books, my teacher was really furious and ordered me outside. I tried to explain what had happened, but my words fell on deaf ears.

"You are just a naughty girl. Nothing you say is true," the teacher said, pointing outside.

I said nothing, and just dragged my feet outside and stood there like a statue. Five of my classmates were with me, so I didn't feel so bad.

For a long time, nobody said anything, but eventually a boy suggested, "Why don't we go to the river for a swim? The weather's perfect today."

At first, nobody replied, but after a short silence, I said, "Yes, that's a good idea." The summer heat was boiling us like potatoes in our skin. I was covered in sweat.

We decided to leave, but we were afraid our teacher would discover our absence. So we decided to sneak away one by one. Our escape went well. We went down to the river that flowed past our village. On the way I saw some of my villagers. They were going in the same direction as us, and asked me where I was going. I lied, telling them we had been let out of class because it was so hot. If I hadn't lied, Mother would have

found out very soon and harshly punished me when I got home.

The air was fresh. Everything looked new at the river. We were delighted just to be there. My companions jumped into the water one by one, and I followed right after them.

Something happened when I jumped into the water. The icy cold of the water made me dizzy. I couldn't see anything and my head exploded in intense pain. I realized that I had dived into a rock. My body went limp, and I felt myself sinking into the water. Suddenly, I heard a voice screaming, "Oh Buddha!"

When I awoke, I opened my eyes and saw Mother's worried face. I asked, "Where am I?"

She replied that I was in the county town hospital, where I stayed for a week. My parents worried about me even more after that.



2013. My villagers gather to celebrate a wedding in Nianhe Village (Metok).



2013. Two of my relatives wear Namuyi clothing at a local wedding (Li Xiaoqiong).



2013. My neighbor with part of the year's corn harvest, Nianhe Village (Metok).

YOUNGER BROTHER

Days passed, and I was eager to finish primary school. My marks were low when I graduated, which meant I couldn't attend middle school in the county town. My parents were embarrassed to discuss this with other people.

At this time, my family, which consisted of my parents, two brothers, my sister, and me, had just moved into a new house, which had used up all our money. Government rules stated that a minority family could have only three children while Han families could have only two. Consequently after Younger Brother's arrival, my family paid 3,000 RMB to the government as a fine.

We were all happy about younger brother's arrival. He was cute and good-looking. I loved him most when he was a baby. I took care of him for a year, because my parents were always busy in the fields or doing migrant labor.

Sometimes Younger Brother defecated and urinated on me, which infuriated me. Sometimes I didn't even want to look at him, but he was very cute, and always smiled at me. His powerful smiles made me feel good, and so I never stayed angry with him for very long.

Once Younger Brother could walk, my family planned to send me to school again, but there were economic problems. Brother's arrival had cost us, we had just spent money on a new house and land, and now my tuition payment was due. These expenses made me us poorer than before.

One morning I went out to collect weeds for pig fodder. When I returned home, my parents were waiting. Mother said,

"Change your dress and wash your face as soon as possible."
When I asked why, she said, "Just do as you're told!"

Once I was ready, Mother said, "Your father and I went to five relatives' homes and managed to gather enough money for your tuition. Please don't disappoint us again."

I wanted to say something, but hesitated, and in the end kept quiet. What I really wanted to say was, "Mother, I will study hard and be a good girl."

Mother and I went to the Nationalities Middle School in the county town. I did study hard and took school seriously. A year later, my exam scores were very high. One semester's tuition was RMB 440 RMB but, because I got high scores, I received a full scholarship and didn't have to pay anything. This pleased my parents.

Yi, Han, and Namuyi students studied together. We learned Yi writing, reading, and speaking, but most classes were in Chinese. Today, I can speak Yi, Chinese, Namuyi and English. This has since made it easier for me to learn new languages.

NEW YEAR

Five days before the New Year, all family members return home, unless they are very far away and cannot return. We have many Han neighbors. During the New Year, we join each other's celebrations, visiting each other's homes. But, Namuyi New Year celebrations are different from the celebrations by Han, as I describe below.

One beautiful day in 2007, when I was fourteen years old, everyone in my family was at home. Winter was still bringing icy winds, but we didn't feel cold. We were warmed by the happiness of being together after months of separation. Father had returned from Yunnan Province, where he had been doing construction work for several years. Younger Brother and I were home too, on school holidays. Sister and Younger Brother had stayed with Mother and, therefore, were already at home. Smiles were on all our faces. I was especially happy about seeing Father after such a long time.

Mother asked Father to take one of us with him when he went shopping. Sister liked shopping and insisted that Father take her with him.

Meanwhile, Mother told Younger Brother and me to cut the New Year tree. We only cut the top out of a pine tree so the tree could continue growing. Mother and Younger Brother stayed at home cooking, while everyone else was outside preparing for the New Year.

Younger Brother and I took an axe and began our search for an attractive pine tree. Mountains and trees surround my village, so finding trees is not difficult, but finding the *right* tree

is always challenging. Every tree has its own beauty and it's hard to decide which one is best.

After hours of searching, we found a suitable tree and happily cut off its top. Then we set out in search of another tree, because Younger Brother had agreed to find a tree for our neighbors. It was tiring, but after cutting two attractive tree tops, we returned home.

Sister and Father returned home after shopping, with new clothes for each of us. They had also purchased everything necessary for cooking delicious meals during the New Year. Everything they brought back was new, colorful, and attractive. The new clothes especially captured my attention, and I wanted to try them on immediately. Anticipating my thoughts, Father immediately handed me a new pink top. After I tried it on, my siblings began trying on their new clothes too, filling the house with laughter. Mother then suddenly called us to come eat dinner. The delicious smells of good food served on a freshly laid table now captured our attention. What a happy time!

Our New Year preparations were done and we ate our delicious meal with satisfaction. Evening had seemingly arrived secretly. We washed our happy faces and feet with warm water. Mother usually told us to wash our faces and feet carefully on New Year's Eve, so that our new year would have a fresh start. After we finished washing our face and feet, we all went to bed.

At around eleven-forty p.m., Father and my brothers woke up and put piles of cooked rice and small pieces of meat cooked earlier in the evening on the top of the pine tree. In addition, Father put fireworks around the pine tree, which was by the kitchen. As soon as they finished decorating the tree, they woke us up so we could hear the fireworks and see the beautifully decorated tree. Father set off the firecrackers at

midnight and offered meat and rice to the four directions by throwing pinches of rice and meat to the west, east, north, and south in turn. This was an offering to all the deities and all our ancestors, so they would also enjoy the New Year, wherever they were among the four directions.

New Year thus began. We celebrated for fifteen days. On the morning of the first day of the New Year we ate vegetables. Namuyi believe that it is auspicious to begin the New Year with a compassionate meal that doesn't require any death. Later, every meal of every day had plenty of meat, beer, fruit-flavored drinks, and candy.

During the fifteen days of the New Year period, Mother told us to enjoy ourselves. We couldn't fight, cry, or work, and we couldn't scold anyone. We had to be joyful the whole time, because a year that started with crying was sure to end with crying. To ensure that we had a good year, we all strictly followed this rule.

Those fifteen days were always my favorite time of the year. Since Father was often away and Younger Brother and I were in school, I appreciated the whole family being together.

FATHER

I love singing and dancing. Father found me annoying because I often sang while we were having dinner, but his displeasure didn't stop me from singing. I sang every day with my whole heart. I had a close relationship with Father when I was a little girl but, as time passed and I grew older, we communicated less and less. I loved Father dearly, but never found a chance to express my feelings. Even though we haven't talked much over the past few years, it hasn't stopped me from thinking about him every single day.

Father is very hard working. Even though he is not well educated, he is a man of great honor and does all he can to bear the burden of supporting his children.

He is a thin, fine-looking man with a fair face. He looks as if he might be blown over by the wind at any moment. My family was very poor for many years, and Father met all the expenditures. To earn money, he took two horses and carried heavy bags of cement from the factory to distant and high construction sites. He earned twenty RMB a day for this difficult work. Every morning when I woke up, I saw my dad leading away two horses.

One bright day, the sun had risen high above the earth. It seemed it was watching something and was in deep thought. I sat inside the classroom, but my heart, mind, and soul were elsewhere. I was thinking of Father again with his two horses.

I was unhappy whenever the sun was bright. It may look beautiful and pleasant in others' eyes, but the reality was the opposite for Father. I was worried about him because hot days

made his work much more difficult. I desperately wanted to do something to help him. That thought possessed me every sunny day until classes were over. I felt uneasy and promised myself that I would do something to help Father move the cement. I did not realize that there was nothing I could do for him. I was far too small to help transport the cement.

Determined to help Father, I ran towards the cement factory. The crickets by the roadside made raucous noises, but I ignored everything around me. Birds chirped in the trees, but I didn't hear them either. Finally, I found Father leading two horses with some difficulty, holding a rope in each hand. I ran towards him happily on a sunlit breeze. I didn't do much to help him that day. Instead, he helped me, letting me ride one of the horses. Together, we happily moved towards our destination.

When I was a little girl, I wished to be an adult with a real job, so that I could ease Father's burden, and we could be happy and comfortable. In my primary school days, Father was always there for me. He sometimes picked me up from school, and always attended parents' meetings. However, once I went to middle school, Father never visited my school, because he had gone to Yunnan to earn money.

Maybe when distance intervenes, relationships become more complex. I only heard from Father occasionally, when he sent money to Mother at the start of each new semester. Life moved on without him. I admired children who had their whole family at home. Father was with us only fifteen days each year, and those fifteen days were the most precious and remarkable days. The moments I spent with Father during childhood were very precious and I treasure them.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

XUYANG

The third year of junior middle school was very important because we would take an exam to enter senior middle school. Completing junior middle school and going on to senior middle school was a big step in life, as my parents constantly reminded me.

I thought that passing the senior middle school exam would not be difficult. I always found exams easy. When it came to the end of semester, I never worried, like other students. I passed easily, and that made me overconfident and careless in my study.

My best friend in junior middle school was Xuyang, a Han girl with very pale skin, and from a rich family. People said she had studied in the county's best school before, but because of her bad behavior and low scores, she was sent to the Nationalities Middle School for her last semester of junior middle school.

Xuyang was very kind to me, and trusted me. One event in particular made me trust her and consider her a true friend. When I was fourteen, the other girls' main preoccupation was comparing clothes with each other. Some of my classmates were from wealthy families and had many nice, expensive clothes. They often discussed who had the most expensive clothes. I never compared my clothes with them, because I came from a big, poor family. On top of that, I didn't like the idea of what they were doing. Mostly, I just kept quiet and did

my own thing.

One afternoon, I was sitting in my classroom reading a book. I especially liked to read real life stories. Suddenly, a classmate called my name from outside. I answered, "Hey "Why are you calling me? What's up?"

She didn't answer; she just beckoned me to follow her. She led me into our dormitory room, where a group of girls had gathered around my bed. Some boys were standing outside our room, peering in. A weeping girl was sitting on my bed.

It was all very confusing. I then realized that something unusual had happened. One of the girls in the room began explaining it to me. Apparently, one of our dorm mates had lost her favorite coat and had looked everywhere for it. Finally, she found it inside the bag of the girl who was crying on my bed. Everyone thought that the girl had stolen it, so they had scolded and beaten her. That girl then told them that I had stolen the coat and given it to her. They had then called me to hear my side of the story.

I almost went crazy. I wanted to kick the girl on the bed, because she had lied so blatantly. How could I steal a coat I had never even seen before? I told them that I didn't know anything about the coat, and refused to explain anything more. I was furious that they would accuse me.

People looked at me strangely. Then Xuyang came to my side and spoke loudly in my defense. Though she was a new student in our school, many students knew her and respected her, because her family was rich. "I believe Li Xiaoqiong. She didn't steal the coat," said Xuyang. Her words immediately silenced the others. Then Xuyang walked away.

Some days later, the truth was revealed. The girl crying on my bed had, in fact, stolen the coat. From then on, I became

fonder of Xuyang, and we became best friends.

Xuyang was beautiful, but a little short. She had big eyes and a small nose. The boys in my class were all crazy about her. Many boys wrote her love letters, but she never even opened them. She told me that she loved a boy who was her old classmate. Every time she talked about him, I could see that she really loved him.

LOVE LETTERS

Several months after Xuyang arrived, the boys stopped chasing her. She ate a lot but remained skinny. We went together to shops where they cooked very delicious potatoes. They cut them into small pieces, put them into boiling oil for five minutes, put them in a big bowl, and sprinkled chili, MSG, and salt on them. The shopkeeper served these delicious potatoes with a big smile. Xuyang always paid the bill and whenever I felt embarrassed and tried to pay, she stopped me.

One afternoon, after a whole semester had almost passed, I had just finished my lunch and gone back to the classroom. I usually put all my books in my small school bag. That day, as usual, I opened my school bag, planning to pull out a book. Instead, I felt a small box, and was very surprised. I opened it, and to my amazement I saw a small painting on a piece of paper, and a letter. I had no idea how those things had gotten into my school bag.

I anxiously opened the letter. It was a love letter. At that time, I didn't really know the meaning of 'love letter'. When our head teacher came to teach Chinese class, I gave the letter to him. He looked at me in surprise, and took the paper from my

hand. After telling us to read the new vocabulary items aloud, he left. After some time, he returned and asked me, "Li Xiaoqiong, who gave you this letter?"

"I don't know," I responded honestly.

He looked at me again and said, "I see."

Some days passed and nothing happened. I kept the small painting. It was cute, and I liked it a lot. Time passed, I didn't learn who had written the letter, and I almost forgot all about it.

But, one day after I had eaten my lunch, I went to my classroom, planning to write something in my notebook. However, I could not find my pen, so I looked around the tables. Eventually I found a pen in one of my friend's desks. I took it and wrote some notes in my notebook.

After writing for a while, I realized something. The ink in that pen was exactly the same color as the ink on my love letter. That afternoon, I told Xuyang what I had discovered, and she was very surprised. Both of us looked at each other in disbelief. The boy who had written the letter was our playmate, and we sometimes ate lunch together. He was a very quiet boy who never spoke a word to us unless we asked him something.

Xuyang suggested that I should ask him about the letter. I was too shy to talk to him, so I insisted that Xuyang ask him for me. She did, and he admitted he had written it.

After a few days, I received another love letter from that boy. This time there was a name, so I knew who had written it. This time I didn't give the letter to the headmaster.

That quiet boy sent me more and more letters, even though I never replied to any of them. Nonetheless, I read all of them carefully. Xuyang told me I should reply, but I didn't.

As time went by, our exam date drew ever closer. Most

students were busy with their studies, but I did not study hard and spent most of my free time with friends. That boy continued writing to me. Finally, I replied with Xuyang's help. After a few attempts I began writing love letters by myself. The boy and I continued to write to each other until we finished the senior middle school entrance exam.

I got good scores on the exam, especially in Chinese, and my family planned to let me study in senior middle school. But things do not always happen in the way we expect them to. That year, my brother became seriously ill, and needed to go to the hospital in the county town.



2013. Namuyi women in front of the groom's home in Nianhe Village, waiting for the bride's arrival (Metok).

A NEW LIFE

SELECTED FOR ETP (ENGLISH TRAINING PROGRAM)

My family spent all our cash on Younger Brother, including what we had saved for my school fees. I was again giving my parents a headache. However, luckily, one of our relatives who studied in Xining City, Qinghai Province, was traveling, recruiting students to enroll in a special school in Xining. When Mother heard the news, she put on her best clothes and went to meet him. I had never met him before.

Mother said, "I have good news!" when she returned. She told me that what we had heard was true, and she had asked our relative to accept me. The next day, Mother woke me early in the morning. She told me to dress nicely. When I finished getting dressed, Mother and I went to see him.

The first time I met him, I did not feel shy. It seemed as if I already knew him. He was a normal looking man, but quite tall and skinny. That day, he told me that there were many foreign teachers in the school in Xining city.

My relative asked me many questions that day, and he also gave me two examination papers. One was math, and the other was Chinese. The examination papers were easy for me, but one of his questions was hard: he wanted me to introduce myself in English. I had never studied English before, so there was nothing I could do. Because of this failure, I thought I would not be accepted.

That day, fifteen other girls were also being interviewed.

I was anxious about the consequences, and waited restlessly to hear the decision. In the end, he called Mother from Xining City, and told her that I had been accepted. My parents were very happy and excited. Just as we all wished, I got the chance to go to Xining City.

We had some time to wait until school started in Xining. While we waited, I imagined my future there, and was especially happy about the prospect of meeting foreigners. My Mother treated me unusually well, and even took me to the county town to buy new clothes. She was relieved that she didn't need to worry about my tuition, because everything in Xining would be free.

Finally, it was time for me to go to Xining. I needed to make a long journey all by myself. I had to take a train for two days and two nights to get there. My parents arranged everything for me, including train tickets, new clothes, food to eat on the train, and they even bought me a cell phone. The new phone especially excited me, because I had never owned my own phone before.

My parents took me to the train station one afternoon. They worried about me traveling alone. It was my first time to go far from home. I assured them I would be fine. My journey to Xining City was my first real step out of my home area. It was full of excitement and I never considered the difficulties. In my head and, in my heart, were only happiness and wild anticipation.

A NEW LIFE IN XINING

Brother Li Jianfu changed my life. If you let me talk about him I have many things to say. He treated me as his real sister, which made me feel great. He is one of the most important people in my life. After I met him, nothing was ever the same again.

Grandmother talked to me about karma. She said, "Everything in this world has its own place. If something is yours, then no matter what happens, you will still get it."

At that time, I really didn't understand what she meant. But I know that fortune never waits for you – you have to make things happen yourself, or karma will never give you what is yours. Karma gave me Brother Li Jianfu, and he gave me an opportunity but, after that, it was up to me to make the most of my time in Xining.

Brother Li Jianfu taught me the importance of living a life for others. When I arrived in Xining he was also a student in the English Training Program (ETP). It was his last year in the ETP at Qinghai Normal University. During my first semester, Brother taught me English and Tibetan for two hours a week. He was very responsible and took care of me.

Two other relatives had studied in ETP before me. I used to see them around when I was a child. They moved to a big city some time during our childhood, and I hadn't seen them since. Most people in my village moved to the city, one by one, because they thought that their children could get a good education there. Fortunately, I got the chance to go to a big city and study, just like city kids who were originally from my village.

Our dorms and classrooms in the ETP were a part of the provincial Special Education School. That was my first time to

see so many special students. Some were blind and some were unable to speak. Most were disabled. I was scared when I first met them. It was a good experience for me to meet them, because despite their challenges, they studied very hard. Some of the blind students could communicate with each other through touch and could write without seeing what they had written. When I saw such things, I told myself, "If such people can study hard, why can't I? I'm so lucky that I don't have such problems." Even though other students teased us about it, I was proud to be with the special students. They inspired me, and every day I worked hard to become a 'special' person.

Our first meeting with our foreign teachers was unforgettable. New students and teachers stood outside the classroom. Some people approached us. They looked totally different from us. I remember one old man very deeply. He had yellow hair and very white skin. When they arrived, I noticed that one man looked like us. He spoke to us in Chinese and introduced the strangers one by one.

After this introduction, the old man began to speak a language I couldn't understand. Then the one who looked similar to us translated. I was very excited. That was my first time to see so many people with yellow hair. I learned that they would be our English teachers. I learned that Teacher Kevin was the old man with yellow hair.

Teacher Kevin gave all of us English names that day. When I got my English name, I was unable to read it, so Teacher Kevin repeated it again and again. My English name is Raylene, and I love this name very much, even though I don't know what it means.

My new name and new life delighted me. I became confident enough to dream my own dreams. In ETP, we often

heard the sentence, "Everything is possible." Now I agree. If you are brave enough to dream your dreams and pursue them, anything really is possible.

My life in ETP was unforgettable and full of joy. I was sixteen when I began my first semester. I had skipped senior middle school. I had classmates from all over the Tibetan Plateau. I told myself, "Raylene, now you have a great chance. Don't let it slip." I began to learn my fourth language, English. Before I came to the ETP, I had never had a chance to learn English. I did not know what the alphabet looked like. Most students were in the same situation as me, but a few students knew some English words and sentences. Before they came to ETP, they had attended senior middle school, and had learned a little English.

Our teacher divided us into two groups: A and B. We were called, "One A" and "One B". I was in One A, because I needed to start to learn English from A, B, C. Every month, one teacher moved some students from One A to One B, depending on our test scores and behavior. The idea that we might be able to move up greatly motivated us and many of us spent all our free time studying in the hope that we would be promoted, as if there was a gift waiting for us. I studied very hard at that time.

All I could think about was joining Class B. Class A students knew nothing about English, but in Class B, they didn't need to start at such an elementary level. They also advanced more quickly. That was the reason I wanted to join Class B – I wanted to learn English quickly. After a month's struggle, due to my hard work, and my participation in class, I was moved to Class B. I was very happy, and shared my news with Brother.

In ETP, if you pursued your dreams they would really

come true. Like other ETP students in our second year, I began to get chances to do projects, for example, a second-hand clothes project or music and photography projects. Our teachers informed us about the projects and we could choose whichever we were interested in. I was not interested in the music and photography projects, but I was interested in doing a second-hand clothes project, because I knew some families in my village lacked clothes. When I heard that there was a project to donate second-hand clothes, I was pleased.

As I said earlier, my dearest brother told me that real happiness comes from living a life for others. Maybe because of that, my dream was to help my community.

Holidays were approaching. Before the vacation arrived, Teacher Kevin gathered us in our classroom one afternoon, and introduced us to the idea of a second-hand clothes project. He explained to us that several boxes of second-hand clothes were being sent from Shanghai, and then asked if anyone was interested in distributing such clothes to villagers who were in need. I excitedly raised my hand and asked if I could take two boxes of second hand-clothes with me when I went home for the vacation. I was thinking about the poorest families in my village – they could really use such clothes, as they did not have enough income to purchase new clothes. I was eager to take the second-hand clothes to my village. After a long discussion, my class and the teachers decided to give me two boxes of clothes. Teacher was careful to explain that the clothes were for families who really needed them, not for relatives or family members. He repeated this several times, and then asked each of us, "Who are the clothes for? Who shouldn't you give them to?" We all answered that we would give them to people who really needed them, and not to our relatives.

After class, I was eager to tell the good news to my relatives, who were studying in grade two of ETP. They were both surprised, and asked me how I would take those two big boxes of clothes back to our village, since it was so difficult to get there from Chengdu. I told them not to worry – I was sure I could figure it out. After about ten days, summer vacation started and I went to Chengdu to pick up the two boxes. My relatives in ETP had already gone home, so I went by myself.

It was a hot summer day in Chengdu. Everyone on the street was dripping with sweat. I felt incredibly hot and uncomfortable as I took a bus to the place where I would collect the second-hand clothes. When I saw the boxes, I was a bit concerned – they were much larger than I had imagined. I decided that it would be impossible to carry them on the bus, and so I paid my own money to take a taxi to the train station. Once I arrived, two kind men helped me to carry the boxes onto the train. Though it was a challenge to organize, I was very happy whenever I thought about the villagers' faces when they opened the boxes.

After two days traveling by train and bus, I successfully made it to my village. The very next day, I took a piece of plain white paper and wrote down the names of the families that would receive the clothes. Then, I went to visit those families and gave the clothes to them. Someone in each family signed their names after I gave them the clothes. It was really wonderful to see how happy people were to receive those things. I was also very happy that day! My second-hand clothes project for my village benefitted 259 people. It was a small project, but I learned a lot from it. I interacted with various people, and thus learned some social interaction skills, for example, how to respect elders when you meet them.

I should thank ETP and the ETP teachers for the opportunities I got. Their teaching skills were great. They did not teach us like the teachers in my junior high school, where most students spent most of class time sleeping. In ETP, students studied hard. During class everybody got a chance to speak and to do exercise sheets. Nobody felt ignored or bored.

That year, I also joined the Shem Women's group and learned how to write project proposals. I had two classes each week in the afternoons, and I learned how to write a good project proposal.

ETP was an important part of my life. The days were full of challenge and reward. After classes started, our studies moved very fast. Progress in One B was much faster than in One A. At first, it was difficult for me to catch up with the other students, but, after a few days, my English improved quickly. As days went by, I did not feel that Class B was too difficult.

I remembered one thing as clearly as if it just happened yesterday. It was early in the morning on my tenth day in Class B. Everybody was sitting in the classroom, waiting for our teacher. I was still naughty and couldn't sit in one place for more than an hour, even if somebody had paid me to do so. As usual, I was jumping up and down in front of the classroom. Our monitor called my name. He was a boy with a big nose and big eyes. I made fun of him by calling him 'Big Nose'. I went back and sat quietly at my desk.

Our monitor said that our class needed to choose someone to look after the computers in the ETP computer lab. He asked us to vote. As we began to choose, our monitor jokingly said, "How about Raylene? I choose Raylene." All the others followed him, except for one girl. Most of them hoped I would look after the computer lab because they didn't want to

do it. Then one remaining girl stood and said very loudly, "I don't want Raylene to be the one to look after the computer lab."

I was very surprised. She said, "Who knows how long Raylene will stay in Class B? It is better to choose somebody else."

I didn't say anything. Normally, I would have immediately fought anyone who said such an insulting thing, but that day I said nothing, even though a fire burned inside my heart.

Our monitor didn't say anything either. In the end, they chose someone else to take care of the computer lab. After that day, my friends asked me, "Why didn't you fight her?"

I said, "I don't know. Maybe what she said was true. Maybe I will go back to Class A." My mouth said that, but my heart did not think it. I told myself that I would stay in Class B until I graduated from ETP.

That girl's comment motivated me to study harder. Whenever our exam scores were posted on the wall, I always checked her score first. All I wanted was to score higher than her.

As time went by, that girl and I became friends. She was a good person. She'd had a successful life before she came to ETP, and had come to our program just to learn English.

In ETP, we were not afraid of teachers beating us. Many people think teachers should beat students when they do something wrong, so that students will be afraid and will work harder. But in ETP, teachers were always kind to us and encouraged us to study hard. They told us stories about successful women and men, especially students who had gone abroad because of their hard work and good behavior.

Sometimes our teachers invited students who had gone abroad to speak to us and share their experiences. We asked them questions and learned about their lives. It was very interesting. From them I learned such study skills as speed reading, skimming, and understanding a new word from the context of the materials in which it appears.

In ETP, I learned that it is possible to be a good teacher without beating students. I also learned that students could work hard and learn because they wanted to, not because they were afraid of teachers.

Life was good, and when everything is good, something bad must be about to happen. There is a story about this.

Once, an old man lived with his son. One day, the son returned home leading a very beautiful horse that was also a fast runner. The son was very happy with his new horse. His father looked unhappy, and said, "Don't be so happy son. Today you've met good fortune, but something bad will happen next."

The next morning, the son took his new horse out for a ride on the grassland. While out riding, he fell and broke his leg. The son was very sad and disappointed, but the father said, "Don't be so sad, maybe it will all turn out for the best."

After some days passed, war broke out, and all the able-bodied young men were conscripted into the army. But, because the son's leg was broken, he stayed at home and did not need to go fight.

Eventually something bad did happen to me. I was accused of stealing money from another student. I didn't do it, but I couldn't prove my innocence. Many people thought I was the thief. No matter how much I protested, it seemed that

everything was against me. Wherever I walked, I heard people whispering, "Thief," behind my back. Trouble and suffering hung over me like a black cloud after that.

I stopped visiting others so often and kept more to myself and studied more than ever.

Just as in the story about the old man, something good came from my suffering: I got the chance to go abroad to continue my education, because in keeping to myself I had markedly improved my scores. When I got that news, I was happier than ever, and when I told my parents, they were delighted. I was the first person from my hometown to get the chance to study abroad.

My last semester at ETP passed quietly. Most students had gone home to find a way in the world for themselves. Only a few students remained, including me, and we all kept at our studies as usual. Some teachers had also left.

After the semester finished I went to India to study for a Bachelors of Business Administration degree. Once again, my life had taken a radical turn.



2008. Mr. Li Jianfu (my relative) in Xining City (Li Xiaoqiong).



2008. Mr. BB Copps (my teacher) and Rita (my classmate) in Xining City, Qinghai Province (Rosanna).

INDIA

It was a beautiful, sunny summer day in Beijing in 2009. Everything was going perfectly. I phoned my family and asked them to say goodbye to all my relatives, friends, and villagers. Since Beijing is very far from my home, no one was there to see me off at the Beijing International Airport with my luggage. My flight was to Delhi. I was on my way to start a new in a mysterious land where I would meet new people with different appearances.

The flight took seven and a half hours. I sat quietly, lost in thought. The tall man sitting next to me was an Indian with curly hair. I eagerly asked him about India. He told me many things about his country and explained that he was a yoga teacher in Beijing.

I safely reached Delhi in the middle of the night. I didn't want to disturb the people at my new college, so I spent the rest of the night at Delhi International Airport wandering around.

Around seven a.m., I called the college and they sent a driver to pick me up. On my way to the college, I saw cows lying in the street. No one chased them away. I was very surprised by this. Furthermore, many people stared at me through the window of the car. I felt somewhat scared. I was in a strange city, and I couldn't see anyone who looked like me. All those around me seemed strange. I had never seen such people in my life before. I was so uncomfortable that I stopped looking out the car window.

I was struck by how this Indian city didn't seem anything like cities in China. There were many vehicles making noises

outside the window. I could feel the dust covering the city. Sometimes, I felt like I was traveling on dirt.

The journey to my college wasn't pleasant. The traffic was terrible. It was very noisy, and I felt depressed. From a distance I saw my college building. It was bright red, newly constructed, and located next to a highway. It was awesome – just like a five star hotel, surrounded by a marvelous garden full of beautiful trees and flowers of different colors and types. I told myself that I had come to the right place. The driver dropped off my luggage and told me to sit inside the reception area.

After some time, a good-looking woman approached me. She told me that her name was Rinchen Drolma and she was the head of the college. She welcomed me, told me to study hard, and said that if I had any problems I should let her know. I had emailed her while I was in China during the application process, and I was both surprised and happy to see her in person.

The warden of the college came to pick up my things and took me to a room where girls were talking in a different language. When they saw me, they fell silent and stared at me, which made me uneasy. When people stare at me, I usually get irritated, but this time I didn't say anything. I just moved my things in and put my bed sheet on an empty bed. It was really a horrible room – the walls were full of holes. I lay on my new bed and thought, "Why am I here?" However, I soon cheered up and began talking with the other girls in my room in English, and they replied politely. They told me they were from Bhutan.

My first week in college was awful. I didn't like the food at all. They never served meat, and the vegetables were terrible. All we had to eat was yellow soup made from *dhal* and onions,

plus rice and fried potatoes. Every day the food was the same. The buildings at the school all looked very beautiful from the outside, but everything was a mess inside. We were also not allowed to go outside the college because they said it was too dangerous. Indian women typically wear scarves and cover their bodies, something I'd never seen in China. Some Muslim girls covered so much of their body that only their eyes were visible. All these things – the food, the mess, having to stay on campus all the time, the unfamiliar culture – made me homesick. To make matters worse, when I began attending classes, I discovered that teachers did not have good spoken English and sometimes spoke Hindi in class. I understood so little. I felt very sad, thinking that all my dreams had come to an end. "Nothing ever goes right for me," I thought to myself.

I started to regret coming to India. I missed my family and my ETP teachers. After only a week in India, I began thinking about returning to China. But then I thought of my family and my teachers who had supported me, and I decided not to give up. They believed in me, and I felt embarrassed to tell them I wanted to come home.

During that time, I wanted to become a bird and fly back to China without anyone noticing. I often cried to myself, because I thought that everything I had wished for had disappeared. I felt nothing except regret for coming to this country called India. I often told my new Bhutanese friends that I would return back home soon. They comforted me, saying, "Don't worry, you'll be able to go home soon," which made me even sadder. I knew it wouldn't be easy to go back home. Finally, I summoned the courage to talk about my situation with my teacher. He encouraged me to stay and learn as much as possible from India. That made me feel better and I tried

harder to adjust to my new situation.

My college was a business school and my course was a BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration). We had classes in Marketing, Human Resource Management, Accounting Management, and International Business. My specialization was Marketing. We attended six classes per day with each class taking an hour and a half.

The Rai Foundation sponsored the college, which was for girls. There were 1,000 girls from sixteen different countries and from all across India. Some students paid half tuition and some paid nothing.

I attended every class and took notes, hoping to glean something from every class. I also began studying English by myself online, and became an avid reader in the college library.

Life improved after I stopped being so negative. When life is different from what we imagine, we must think positively and be happy. Self-study can be very useful and meeting new people in a new place is a valuable experience. To learn other people's culture, religion, and beliefs expands your mind. My new outlook on life made it easier for me to cope, and life moved on.

TRAVELS IN INDIA

I can now speak simple Hindi and have simple conversations with Indian people. One of my Indian friends taught me Hindi when we studied together.

I have good friends from Bhutan, Africa, and India. Life is good when friends are around, and I am glad to have friends from all over the world.

India is a country of many different people from various backgrounds. Its diversity makes India unique. Most Indians are Hindu, but there are also Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists. People with different religions often have problems in understanding each other but, in India, people live peacefully with difference.

Although not a very religious person before going to India, after some time there, I became more interested in religion. Many Indians eat only vegetables throughout their lives, which is related to their religious faith. An Indian friend told me that it is their faith that keeps Indian people alive. I consider myself a Buddhist, but have never really been involved in religious activities. Most of my life has been spent in schools and colleges where religion has no place.

When I went to northeast India, I saw people who looked similar to me. They were very different from the Indians I met in college. That place was not as noisy as Delhi. Most people spoke English, and there were many foreigners there learning meditation and yoga. While there, I joined a workshop for one month and attended a ten-day retreat about Buddhist studies and meditation. An Australian Buddhist nun was in charge of the center. After that month, I came to know that Buddhism is so vast, and I wished to be devout. I became very positive and never had any further negativity about India.

In becoming more confident, I learned to embrace differences. If everyone were the same, then there wouldn't be any uniqueness in the world. In life, it is important to value and respect human difference.

WORKING IN AN NGO

One exciting day, my schoolmates, dressed nicely in college uniform and looking joyful, called me to join them for an interview arranged by our school head.

Everyone was soon ready with their resumes in hand, lined up, waiting for the interviewer. After some time, three women, one middle-aged and two elderly, approached. We guessed they were the interviewers, and bowed our heads to show respect while offering greetings. They had come from Delhi to interview us for positions in an NGO called Sudidaly.

I was both excited and scared when it came my turn. After I began talking to the interviewers, I became less nervous. My first-round interview went well and they told me to come back for the second round that afternoon. Some of my friends had also been selected for the second round.

I was told that my post would be as a public relations officer dealing with the United Nations. I was so pleased and imagined it would be the greatest experience of my life. What would it be like working in an NGO? After a few days of waiting for the official letters, we boarded a college bus and headed to Delhi.

Two and half hours later we were in our rooms. The NGO building was imposingly huge and old. Although our room was quite small, it had been freshly painted.

The first night was terrible. We weren't given any food and went to sleep hungry. We got up early the next morning and went for breakfast outside the NGO headquarters, which was located in an urban area. As soon as we stepped out the front door, we saw mobile phone shops and many small restaurants.

Work at the NGO started. I thought we were working with the United Nations but we quickly realized that we had been misled. In fact, the NGO's clients were ill and physically disabled people. I'd always wanted to be a social worker, so illness and disability didn't scare me away. The NGO had a treatment room and a nurse who, sadly, lacked experience and was irresponsible as she rarely came to work. The NGO mainly accepted patients who were about to die. We lived inside the NGO's headquarters with the patients, but I often went outside to meetings and to ask the Indian media to report on our work. We were trying to get the Indian Government's attention, so that it would provide funding to support our patients, who included people suffering from HIV and tuberculosis, as well as mentally disabled people.

Every day we traveled across Delhi in ambulances with patients. I even felt like a hero at times. I never felt ashamed to sit inside the ambulance. Once we went to an important national newspaper – *The Times of India* – in the ambulance. The gate guard would not allow us to enter, so we parked the ambulance outside. One of my colleagues was exhausted and lay on the ambulance bed. The guard saw her and thought it was a corpse, and chased us away. Despite many such incidents, we were all honored to do that job, because we believed that we were on the right track and helping people.

One morning at five a.m., my friend and co-worker suddenly came into our room, looking shaken and exhausted. She told me that one of our HIV patients had died. I was scared. When she asked me to return with her to the ward, I realized that I would have to see the corpse, and felt a sudden sense of dread. I hesitated, but after a long struggle, I followed. I grabbed my digital camera, but before reaching the place where

the body was, I gave my camera to my friend and fled. I was just too frightened. My friend pleaded with me to go with her, and finally I stood with her without looking at the corpse. My friend bravely took pictures of the corpse and then arranged for the corpse to be taken by the police. The pictures were to record the dead person's presence at the NGO, not for the police.

After everything was done, I was still frightened. My friend and I wrote the death report, which was also for the NGO's own records, stating when and how the person died. NGOs must be careful to keep such records and be transparent and accountable to the public.

The patient had come from a rich, reputable family. He was forty-two years old when he died. Both his parents were still alive, and he had two daughters and three sons. He had sisters and brothers too, and all of them were rich. They had kicked him out of the family when they discovered that he was HIV positive. He had been admitted to many NGOs and hospitals, but no one treated him well. So one day, he came to our NGO, searching for a place to live. The manager of our NGO was a powerful woman who worked in the Supreme Court of India. She had helped many people.

We helped all the HIV patients with care and love, but in this case the man died the very next day after arriving. I felt visceral pain. I pitied him, and cried because of his cruel family. How could a family just ignore their beloved son, father, and brother when he needed them? Even now I cannot bear to think about it.

There were things about Delhi that impressed me. Delhi is the third most populous city in India. Many planes cluttered the sky overhead and trains constantly crossed near my hostel. The sound of traffic jams was incessant.

Delhi is famous for its auto-rickshaws, which are similar to taxis, but much cheaper. Many consider taxis too expensive and take auto-rickshaws, which are cheap, convenient, and everywhere in the city.

The city has the fastest subway system in India, but it doesn't go all over Delhi. Even though the city is dirty, dusty, and full of plastic bags, it was still possible to see many nicely manicured green parks and well-preserved historical pilgrimage sites. I liked the plants and greenness of Delhi.

I also loved meeting people from all over the world. I met Brazilians, Germans, Russians, and Americans in the hostel where I stayed. I learned a few words of Spanish from some people staying in the guesthouse, and was again amazed at the beauty of new and different languages. The Americans who stayed in the hostel were not as talkative and sociable as the Russians and Brazilians.

The hostel where we lived was near a subway station. Our college founder, Mr. Rai, provided the accommodation. Monkeys and peacocks lived within the hostel grounds. In India you could see many animals on the streets – creatures you could only see in zoos back in China.

I usually took the subway to my office. My friends told me not to go out after eight p.m. They said it wasn't safe for girls to walk alone. When I heard that, I was scared, but somehow I didn't take them too seriously. I believe in karma and thought that if I didn't harm others, I needn't feel frightened or guilty. This faith kept me positive about the city, and I never missed a festival or special event in India because I was afraid.

I liked roaming around Delhi on the weekends. There were many places to visit and I never felt tired. The Red Fort

was a favorite destination because it was always crowded and busy. I also often went to the American Library in Delhi because it was a great place to study.

Delhi has many festivals such as Diwali and Dashra. During Holi, the 'Festival of Colors', people enjoy themselves throwing different colored powder at each other.

Early one fine summer morning my roommates and I were awoken by desperate knocking on our door. I opened the door, still half asleep. It was my classmate from an adjoining room. She exclaimed, "Happy Holi," took out a bag of colored powder she had hidden behind her back, colored my face with it, and then told me to come down and join the celebration. I realized it was the time when people put colored powder on each other's faces, believing that beautiful colors bring them a colorful life, and peace and happiness. My face and clothes had already been covered in color, so I didn't think twice about joining the festivities. I covered my roommates in colored powder, and soon we were in the streets crowded with people, music, and color. My college mates, colleagues, and senior managers were chasing after each other with handfuls of colored powder.

I was amazed to see a scene full of so many happy people. Some people were squirting water at each other. The music was really rocking. We danced in water that sprayed out of burst pipes, chased each other, and tried to put more colored powder on each other's faces. I wholeheartedly joined my friends and colleagues, and felt much joy. The day ended with laughter. That was the most memorable day of my life in India. I miss Holi now that I am back in China. After that day, I fell deeply in love with Indian culture – its music, dance, and festivals.

Everything returned to normal the next day. As usual, on

my way to the office, I took the subway, which has a special section for women. I observed the different faces of the train travelers. The people were so different: their clothing, faces, and manner of talking. I saw a few women wearing suits, ties, and fashionable clothes. Most women and girls wore traditional suits or saris. Men generally wore suits and ties.

Indian women's status is low and they receive little respect. An Indian friend told me about the dowry system. Families who have many daughters suffer. The bride's family must pay tens of thousands of rupees and give many gifts to the groom's family. If a bride's family doesn't have money, their daughters can't marry. I heard many sad stories of unborn babies being killed, or daughters being abandoned because of the dowry system. Nobody wants daughters, because they think that baby girls bring bad luck and are a waste of money.

Why should girls suffer in a free country? I hope India will one day be like many other free countries and women will get the freedom they deserve.

I soon used up all my savings. The NGO offered one hundred dollars per month, however, we had not yet been paid. Every day we fetched water for patients and went to meetings, which were always very boring. A few more patients died while I was at the NGO, and I could never bear to see their corpses. I had bad dreams while I was working there. I dreamt I became ill with the same diseases as the patients, and that my family kicked me out. Eventually, I couldn't stand the bad dreams, the poverty, the stress, and the boredom. I left.

I returned to school to rest. I felt weird. How could I leave my NGO job like that? The NGO boss was very angry with me and didn't pay my salary. I felt lost and helpless. I stayed in the school for a month and slowly felt better.

This short experience in the NGO reminded me that life is precious. I promised myself I would live fully and pursue my dreams, no matter what it took. Even if I die of a disease, I will die with my dreams realized.

DELHI DIFFICULTIES

A slow gust of fresh air blew over my face one morning. I felt lost, totally lost. After finishing my exams, I was joy-less, exam-less, job-less, and penniless. Life in college was a lot easier than in the outside world, but I still chose to leave college in search of a new internship during the holiday. In college I didn't have to pay rent or other living costs, but in Delhi I could get a paid internship and thus manage both my living expenses and study costs. After some days of rest, I decided to give life in Delhi another go. Even though life in Delhi was expensive, I preferred to live there where I could grow as a person and realize my dreams.

I left the college and stayed with some Tibetan friends that I had made in college. The building where we lived in Delhi was nice and well-maintained. We had two rooms for four girls. It was fun to live with people whom I knew and felt happy with.

Nonetheless, the first few days of my stay were not easy. I felt emptiness within myself, not because of the environment and the people I was staying with, but from the stress of searching for a paid internship. It was hard to find such work and I couldn't get a real job because I didn't have a work permit. I spent my time running to every corner of Delhi, searching for internships and sitting for interviews, one after the other. I spent most of the money Mother had recently sent me on

transportation costs. My budget became steadily smaller and I became increasingly tense. "What am I supposed to do if I can't get a paid internship after I finish all of my savings? Will I just return to college?" I asked myself. Many questions ran through my mind.

Some of the interviews went well, but there was always one problem or another. For one interview with a recruitment firm, I went to the interview office earlier than anyone else, but was the last one interviewed. By the time the interviewer called me, I was asleep, due to the long hours of waiting. Somehow, I made it to the interview, but only after they had called my name three times.

The interview was a disaster. The interviewer asked my name, but then couldn't pronounce it properly. Ages passed with him trying to say my name correctly. He asked lots of questions about my work and other experiences. Finally, he asked me where I was from. When I told him I was from China, Then he said, "I'm sorry, we cannot recruit international candidates. We're looking for people who speak fluent Hindi." Obviously I didn't get the job. I was totally exhausted by such endless interviews.

Traveling on the subway during rush hours meant it was impossible to get a seat. Even breathing was a problem, because India has the second largest population in the world, and all of them seem to ride the subway in Delhi.

I began to feel homesick again. In spite of everything, however, I liked Delhi. I met lots of new people and learned things that helped me understand India better. I had some friends from northeast India and they were very friendly and kind. They told me that there are seven states in northeast India – the Seven Sisters. My Tibetan friends were from such

Himalayan regions as Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh. Others were from south India. It was nice to meet such people, with whom I had so much in common, including a shared religious faith.

WATCHING THE STREETS AND THINKING ABOUT LIFE

I enjoyed watching people cross the street in Delhi.

One day the sun was out of its bed, but covered by clouds, looking sheepish. I was bored. My room was not far from the streets, and the noise of cars and other vehicles irritated me. The terrace of our building became my favorite place to go every day, since I could not often go to the green parks. I usually went to the terrace to read, and then watched people cross the street. Sometimes I tried to uncover some feelings and write poems but, on that day, it just didn't happen. I told myself I needed a peaceful, green place to explore my mind and provide space to think.

I don't know when I started to fall in love with poetry and novels. I love John Keats. When I read his biography, I am deeply moved. I feel sorry that he died when he was only about twenty-five. He became famous only after his death. This reminded me that it's not easy to be successful. Even if we work hard and have real talent, we may never succeed. But, if we are true to ourselves and realize our own worth, we will always feel serene within the eternity of ourselves, and we will die without regret.

In watching people cross the street, my feelings for life multiplied. That day on the terrace, I saw a blind man crossing the street with a walking stick. He looked healthy and happy.

Bikes and people were passing him. He managed to cross the street by himself, and went on his way. Everybody on the streets was busy with their own lives. Nobody paid attention to others. I wished I was also a busy person with a real job and meaningful things to do, so I would no longer feel bored.

I envied people passing on the streets with their parents. I missed my family and was always thankful for my lovely roommates who treated me well and cared about me. I then felt less homesick. But still, I always imagined the time I would return home with my graduation certificates. I guessed I would be the happiest person in the world at that time. When I thought of that, I felt that everything was worthwhile.

My roommates frequently communicated with their parents. I admired their relationships, especially those with their fathers. When I was ready to enter junior middle school, Father had tried to stop me, which made me resentful. I understood that he did the best he could for our family and maybe, at that time, he thought he was doing what was best for me.

Sometimes I wanted to communicate with him and called him up, but when the phone started ringing, I turned my phone off. I did that repeatedly. For some reason I never had the courage to call and speak with him. One day I hope I can talk to him as one adult to another, and show my love for him, though I know that love is not always best expressed through words.

My remaining days in India grew fewer. I started worrying about my future once again. What could I do after returning to China? I lacked powerful connections. Those thoughts often enveloped me. I wanted to go to an English-speaking country to continue my studies and further

explore English literature. I knew it would be a struggle for me to go abroad again, but I was confident that I could do it.

FRIENDS

After more days of struggle, I finally got a fine, tough job in a call center that provided service for customers from the UK. Labi, my classmate, worked in the same call center. It is really comfortable to work with someone you know and I also made a few new friends there.

Eight-thirty a.m. in the UK was three p.m. in India. On the first day at the call center, I woke up at one p.m. India time, washed, and had a simple breakfast of a glass of Indian tea and *chapatti*, which I bought near my apartment. I was excited. I dressed formally and waited for a driver to pick me up. All the call centers provide cabs for their employees.

At two p.m., the driver called me. I then went out to the car and, along with other employees, headed to Gurgone, which is a part of Delhi where most call centers are located. The weather was warm and so beautiful that it was breathtaking. On our way to the call center, the sun became so bright that I couldn't look at the sky.

Vehicles were making a lot of noise and we got caught in a traffic jam. We moved forward very slowly. After an hour, we reached our work place. If we had not been caught in the traffic jam, it would have been only twenty minutes. We were then escorted to our office. There were around sixty people there. The office was huge. There was also a cafeteria and a kitchen. Everybody in the office was wearing a headset and was busy talking. Nobody paid any attention to me. People's mouths were

moving and their faces suggested their emotions changed from time to time. Some were sitting on chairs, some were standing, and some were turned so their backs were to the wall. They were deep in concentration, as if nothing could take their attention away from their work.

I had seen such scenes only in movies. Before I decided to apply for a call center job, I had watched a movie called *The Other End of the Line*.³ It is a beautiful, romantic love story about a call center worker and a client. The movie showed the lifestyle of people working in the call center. Watching this film encouraged me to want to work in a call center.

I soon met Labi and the boss. They introduced me to the team and welcomed me. They gave me two English names to choose from – Jennifer Smith and Lisa Parker. I chose Jennifer Smith because I thought it was easier for people to remember. The employees at call centers often use a Western name to convince the customers from the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia that they are from an English speaking country. If you work in a UK call center, you must have a name that is very British. The first day at work I sat by Labi with a headset to listen to her conversations with customers from the United Kingdom. I listened the whole day and read some materials about answering calls. I thought it was easy to work in a call center in the beginning because I thought all you had to do was know English. I was wrong – just knowing English is not enough.

After a few days of coaching and training by the

³ *The Other End of the Line* is a 2008 romantic comedy starring Jesse Metcalfe, Shriya Saran, and Anupam Kher. The film is about an employee at an Indian call-center who travels to San Francisco to be with a man she has fallen in love with over the phone.

supervisor and Labi, I pretended to be the call center employee and my boss pretended to be the customer. After several rounds of practice, my boss thought I was ready to take phone calls. I then took a few customers' calls as Labi and our boss listened in. The first call was with a man. I said, "Hello, I'm Jennifer Smith. I'm calling from PPI (Payment Protection Issuance)." Then I didn't know what to say. I was too nervous to continue the call. My face was red.

My boss stared at me strangely and said, "You have the script. Why didn't you finish the conversation?"

I said, "I was too nervous."

He was shocked, but then calmed down. He told Labi to continue to coach me about how to start and continue a conversation.

Later, I dialed just one customer repeatedly. I was often disconnected after talking for a while and then the customer got upset and would not answer the phone. I realized it was really not easy to work in a call center even if you spoke very good English. I was stressed. It was my twentieth day in the call center and my boss was also upset. He said, "If you can't remember the script and deal with a customer tomorrow, then I will fire you."

I was worried and tense. That night, I went with Labi to her apartment to prepare for the next day. In the cab to her home, I was feeling depressed. I told Labi, "If tomorrow I can't succeed, then I'll have to return to the college and that's really sad."

Labi held my hand tightly and said, "Don't be depressed. You did a great job when we were in college. When we were doing presentations, everybody but you gave up. You took a whole day to finish preparing your presentation, which won the

prize. You can do better. I believe in you."

I was moved, put my head on her shoulder, and cried like a baby.

Thus encouraged, I practiced the dialing script with Labi til six a.m. the next morning. A real friend encourages you and stands with you when you are down, and that's exactly what I feel about my dearest friend, Labi.

I was successful the next day and my days at the call center then went smoothly. My most difficult experience was with one very critical customer. When I called, she was so upset that she hung up. I called again, introduced myself as a PPI agent who was helping her finish her application. Before I finished my introduction, she interrupted and said that I sounded like an Asian. Then she started insulting me.

I replied that I was not Asian, that I was born in London, and that both my parents were British. She didn't believe me. She said I was a fraud. I then transferred the call to Labi, who read her security numbers that were on her application. Labi also explained about the application process. The customer was convinced and her application was successfully completed. I transferred the difficult customers to Labi, since she was much more experienced than me.

I made two more friends in the company after a few weeks working there. Both were Indians with very different cultures and religious beliefs.

The young man, Yan, was a Christian from Nagaland in northeast India and spoke fluent English, Hindi, and his own language. He had a fun and loving personality. Yan graduated with a commerce college degree. Unable to find a job related to his major after graduation, he came to Delhi and eventually took a job at the call center. When I met him, he had been

working there for about five years and was a supervisor. He loved his work and told us that his dream was to open his own call center in the future.

The young woman was a Hindu from Delhi. She was talkative and fun. She dropped out from Delhi University after only a year because her family couldn't pay her tuition. She joined the call center because she thought they paid well and that she could improve her English skills. Her dream was to become an English teacher.

Life continued. I enjoyed working in the office and totally forgot about my studies for a while, but I never forgot my dreams. I cannot be happy if I am idle. Life without dream or goals is nothing. A human life is so precious, and growing up is tough. This means we must do something important in life. We must believe there is a reason why we are living on this beautiful planet called earth.

Earlier, all I had wanted was to get a degree and return to China, but now I felt somehow sad. I loved my life in India, even though I missed my home. I liked the kind people I interacted with, and really didn't want to leave them. I had slowly fallen in love with India, and had mixed feelings. I had now been in India for a total of four years, two of which had been spent living at college attending classes. The rest of the time was outside my college, doing various jobs.

The first two years of college had been very intense. The college then encouraged us to leave and do internships and research. We were only required to attend exams. Nobody cared if we were absent from classes as long as we passed the exams. This gave me opportunities to make friends and made me want to remain in India.

After I earned my degree, Mother was desperate for me

to return to China. She often wept over the phone. This made me feel sad for her so I decided to return to China.

Shelley wrote:

The flower that smiles today
Tomorrow dies;
All that we wish to stay
Tempt and then flies;
What is this world's delight?
Lightning, that mocks the night,
Brief even as bright.

Virtue, how frail it is!
Friendship, how rare!
Love, how it sells poor bliss
For proud despair!
But these though they soon fall,
Survive their joy, and all
Which ours we call.

Whilst skies are blue and bright,
Whilst flowers are gay,
Whilst eyes that change ere night
Make glad the day;

Whilst yet the calm hours creep,
Dream thou – and from thy sleep
Then wake to weep.

I felt exactly the same way.

The sad part for people who like travelling is that we need to sacrifice to achieve our dreams. In the end, no one stays constantly with us – friends, family, and colleagues. They all leave as we continue to make new friends and meet new people.

There are times when I feel sad because I wish to bring all my family and friends with me wherever I go, but I know this will never happen.

The year 2012 arrived, and my job in the call center was going smoothly. I had found inner peace. I was happy and satisfied. I then set out to do all the things that I had wanted to do while I was still in India. I worked hard and made plans accordingly.



2011. At the Red Fort, Dehli with my Indian friend, Mallika (Riya).



2011. Central Park, Delhi (Li Xiaoqiong).



2010. With an Indian classmate during the Holi Festival, Rai University (Beshno).



2011. Delhi Metro Station (Mallika).



2010. With an Afghani classmate, Rai University (Rizing).



2011. Evening at Lotus Temple, Delhi (Li Xiaoqiong).



2011. International Women's Day, Rai Foundation (India Express).



2012. Indian food (Li Xiaoqiong).



May 2011. Rai University, Rajasthan (Li Xiaoqiong).



May 2011. I wear a traditional Tibetan dress with my Nepali and Ladakhi classmates (Disket).



2011. Visiting a milk factory (Laxmi).



2011. At my workplace in Delhi (a colleague).

BACK TO CHINA

It was a hot summer day in July 2012 when I said goodbye to my friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. I thanked them for their help and friendliness. Yan and his sister came to the airport to say goodbye. My feelings were so strong. I didn't know what to say to make them and myself feel better. Yan's sister started crying and asked, "When will you come back to see us?"

I didn't know what to say to comfort her but, wanting her to feel better, I said, "I'll be back in two years." Actually I didn't know then and I don't know now if I will ever return to India.

With a heavy, unwilling heart and tears trickling down my cheeks, I moved to the airport entrance and waved to Yan and his sister. While I was excited to return to China and see my family again, I was also anxious about what I would do when I got back.

I was soon on my plane en route to Shanghai International Airport. Shortly after arrival, I transferred to a plane to Chengdu City, the capital of Sichuan Province. From the Chengdu airport, I took a taxi to a bus station and bought a ticket to Mianning County Town. Once there, I got on a small bus that took me to my home village. In total, it took me four days to get home.

Getting off the bus, I was happy and amazed by the greenness surrounding our house. Everything seemed so peaceful after the mad rush of Delhi, Shanghai, and Chengdu. Barley grew stoutly in the fields, bobbing its heads back and forth, as if welcoming me back home. I took a long breath and

relaxed. I gathered my belongings and walked towards my home.

Seeing Mother, Little Brother, and Sister coming toward me, I waved and shouted, "Mother! Mother!" They excitedly hurried to where I was staying and helped me with my belongings. Mother told me I had become plump and healthy-looking. I didn't know if that was a compliment or a greeting, but I smiled.

Mother explained, "Your father and Li Dingbo are at a construction site in Ganzi. They won't be back until the New Year." Li Xiaobao was giggling, and asking me what I had bought for him.

Before I had arrived, I imagined various reactions from my parents and siblings, because we had not seen each other for four years – hugging, jumping around, and tears of happiness. To my surprise, it was very ordinary.

Mother said, "Welcome home little girl."

Love is often not expressible with words. Even a small gesture can demonstrate the extent of our love for each other. I felt so relaxed to be home. I was eager to see our orchard and the trees we had planted there.

I spent three days enjoying beef, pork, and fish. My relatives and fellow villagers invited me to their homes. I also met childhood friends. Everything had changed. A neighboring childhood playmate was married with a two-year-old son.

After three days at home, Mother told me to look for a job in Chengdu.

I said in astonishment, "I just returned and now you are asking me to leave and search for work?" I was annoyed. I planned to visit the mountains I hadn't visited for years. I wanted to collect mushrooms in the forest.

Mother explained, "It's great you went abroad but now you don't have an impressive job. If you just stay here in the village, people will laugh at you and our family. People will say that you going abroad meant nothing, because you are at home. They will believe you are incapable of getting a job."

There was some precedent for this. A young villager became a soldier many years ago. When he returned to our village, he stayed at home with no government job. He returned to the life of a farmer. When villagers asked him what he did in the army, he said he fed pigs. Villagers mock him even today because of this story.

I agreed with mother and planned to leave the next day for Chengdu by bus. I would stay in the home of a relative during my job search.

Some of my relatives were surprised to learn I would leave after such a short visit home. Mother thinks differently than many villagers. When I was a child, most villagers thought that girls shouldn't go to school because they would marry and leave their parents' home, so schooling wasn't worth the investment. But Mother hoped that I would get a well-paying job in a big city, working for big multinational companies. That, she said, would make her proud of me.

My cousin met me at the bus station in Chengdu and took me to his home. He had worked as a car salesman for ten years in Chengdu. He married a Chinese woman from Chengdu and they have a one-year-old daughter.

His two-floor apartment was beautifully decorated and had three rooms on the first floor and two rooms on the second floor. He also had a beautiful terrace where eggplants and grapes grew.

My cousin assured me that I could find a job in Chengdu

easily because I knew English. I then sent out my CV to everyone I could think of, searched for jobs on-line, and registered on many websites.

Despite sending my CV to more than fifty people, I got no replies. Later, I learned about a multinational import-export company recruiting employees in Chengdu. I applied and got an offer.

Meanwhile, a friend introduced me to a Swiss woman, Claudia, operating a company called CHEERS Imported Wine. Not long after I contacted Claudia by email, she phoned me. After the phone interview, she offered me a job and told me she would pay for my travel to Beijing.

I felt the job in Beijing was more attractive. The next day I bought a ticket and went to Beijing. Claudia had red hair and was a very dynamic young professional. The next day, she took me to the office and introduced me to the company departments and people. CHEERS, in 2013, had fourteen stores across Beijing with offices in Shanghai, Chengdu, and Qingdao.

As I write this, I am a store manager in one of the best CHEERS stores in Beijing. I manage six staff. I am responsible for training in sales, customer service improvement, and assist in turnover and budget forecasting reports. This position has developed my organizational, communication, teamwork, and leadership skills. I see much future and hope in this company.



2013. With the CHEERS Management Team (Serguleng Han).

POETRY

MOTHER'S LOVE

Oh, Mother, the most beautiful mother of all,
You are the sunshine of my life.
The gods know they cannot always be with us, so they created
 mothers to guide us.
I saw a mother holding her baby on the roadside yesterday.
I thought of you, who have never lost your love for me.
When I am sad, you are always there for me.
You have never run from me, no matter how difficult the
 situation.
I give you respect, and you return sincerity.
You trusted me, making me a trustworthy person.
You punished me when I did wrong,
And this made me realize my mistakes, and so I learned.
You gave me appreciation and support.
You made me a positive person.
You forgave me when I was wrong.
I felt the love of an angel, a super-being, the constant light of
 my life.
Oh mother, you are that angel.
You are my life and I am your daughter.
Without you I wouldn't be in this world.
Lucky me to have you as my mother in this life.

FOR ALL TEACHERS

That was a beautiful morning, when I saw your smile.
You constantly showed me your big smile, and taught me how
to read and write.
No matter how busy you were, you never missed any events.
Time flies and I grow older with you,
Though time has passed, you never changed,
You taught me every little thing about life.
Some say teachers are like our parents.
I must agree, because you gave all your love and affection to
me.
Though we lack a blood relationship, you cared for and loved
me so dearly
Made me happy and grateful.
Oh, beloved teachers, I am describing you who taught me.
Now I am an adult woman, all because of your care and love.
No words can express my appreciation and love for you.
I say again, oh, dear teachers, you made me shine with a dream.
Days and mornings passed beautifully when I was with you.
And I am now missing those days when I was with you.
Life moves on, but my memory of you never fades.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Agu Suniyi 啊古苏尼已 Li Xiaoqiong's father

Agu Xiaoqingmi 啊古小庆米 Li Xiaoqiong's Namuyi name

Baji Wujimi 巴几无级咪 Li Xiaoqiong's mother

Beijing 北京 City

Chengdu 成都 City

cuonumi

Drolma ལྷོ་མ། Sgrol ma, Li Xiaoqiong's Tibetan name

Ganzi 甘孜 Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Han 汉, an ethnic group in China

Han Xiaoyan 韩小艳 person's name

Serguleng Han, Hansirguleng 韩斯日古冷

Holi 'Festival of Colors' a Hindu festival

Ji Wenmei 吉文美 Li Xiaoqiong's mother

Kushi 古石, 纳木依新年 Namuyi New Year

Labi, an Indian woman's name

Li Chunbo 李春波

Li Dingbo 李丁波 Li Xiaoqiong's brother

Li Jianfu 李建富 Li Xiaoqiong's distant relative

Li Jinxiu 李金秀

Li Xiaobao 李小宝 Li Xiaoqiong's brother

Li Xiaohui 李小会

Li Xiaoqiong 李琼 the author of this book

Li Zhicai 李志才

Liangshan 凉山 Yi Autonomous Prefecture

Lianhe 联合 Village

Mallika, an Indian woman's name

Mao Zedong 毛泽东

Mianning 冕宁 place name

Metok མེ་རྟོག

Namuyi 纳木依/义

pazi

Qin Xiaoying 秦小英

Qinghai 青海 Province

Rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རྡོ་རྗེ།

Rinchen Drolma རིན་ཆེན་སྒྲུ་ལ་མ།

RMB 人民币

Shanghai 上海 City

Shu Luomo 书罗莫

Tserang ཚེ་རིང་། boy's name

Xining 西宁 City

Xuyang 徐阳 girl's name

Yalong 雅砻 River

Yi 彝 an ethnic group in China